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How to Turn “a bunch of gang-bangin’ criminals into big kids having fun”¹: Empowering Incarcerated and At-Risk Youth through Ensemble Theatre

Courtney Elkin Mohler

The Situation

Los Angeles County is the “epicenter of gang activity nationwide,” with an estimated 175,000 gang members and more than 1,400 gangs.² Although crime has been on the decline, gang membership continues to rise, largely due to increasing participation by minors. The total number of youth on probation in the Los Angeles probation system in 2009 is 18,285; in 2007 alone, 4,398 youths were admitted into residential probation-camp facilities, which provide structured treatment and programming for juvenile offenders.³ These statistics of high youth involvement in gangs, along with corresponding criminal activity and arrests, have resulted in an aggressive, multi-pronged gang-reduction and -prevention approach that includes strict gang injunctions, as well as increased educational and extracurricular programming designed to reduce youths’ gang membership and activity (Dunworth, Hayeslip, Lyons, and Denver 15–26). Like the youths’ gang affiliations themselves, which can be seen as actively performing resistance to existing socio-demographic structures and societal norms, these gang-reduction and -prevention strategies can be read as performative—performing the power dynamics of the state over perceived abhorrent behavior.

Gang injunctions, which have become prevalent in Los Angeles County since the first one was filed in 1987, bar behavior (particularly behavior rich in semiotics) that would otherwise be legal, such as “wearing certain clothes, making certain hand signs, going to certain parks” (Gold). And some injunctions include provisions that outlaw two or more alleged gang members from associating in public, even when no illegal activity is underway. Like these injunctions, gang-reduction and -prevention programs also can be read in Foucauldian terms, as an official attempt to normalize disruptive or defiant behavior; through education, modeling, and positive reinforcement, these programs aim to mold the rebellious juveniles into productive “docile” bodies (Foucault 136). Despite some of the more conservative aspects of the methods and goals employed to address youth criminal behavior, certain gang-reduction and -prevention performing arts programs have the potential to empower youth by increasing their sense of agency and creative autonomy. This essay explores the praxis of Unusual Suspects Theatre Company (US), a nonprofit educational organization based in Los Angeles, as one model of how performing arts programming can change the power dynamics in spaces designed to “normalize” and “recidivate” by supporting the imaginative authority of participants who are often rendered powerless and marginalized by the institutions that “serve” them.

US runs writing and performance programs for several types of youth communities: youths under age 18 who are serving time in county-run probation camps; youths under 18 who are living in the foster care/mental healthcare system; youths who live in areas with high levels of gang activity and have tested as likely to fall into criminal behavior by the Youth Service Eligibility Tool;⁴ and young adults who are “wards of the state—aged 18–25 years old—who were sent to the facility’s Juvenile Hall as minors and who have since graduated to the Youth Correctional Facility” for serious crimes they committed when they were minors (Alden). In all of these cases, the minors volunteer to participate in a US program, sometimes

choosing the program out of other possible extracurricular activities offered by their host institution or program.

The company relies on private and public grants and donations, ranging from individual sponsorships as small as \$25 to large-scale grants by foundations like the National Endowment for the Arts, which in 2010 gave over \$50,000;⁵ these funds allow the company to maintain an administrative and artistic staff and employ qualified theatre professionals as teaching artists (TAs) to develop and implement curriculum at each site. Whenever possible, the partnering organizations, programs, or institutions contribute some amount of funding to host a US program, in addition to providing the rehearsal and performance spaces.⁶

Terms of This Study

My involvement with US began in 2008, shortly after completing my Ph.D. in Critical Studies in Theater at the University of California, Los Angeles. A colleague forwarded me the application call for a free three-day Teaching Artist Training Workshop, run by US and funded by the Ahmanson Foundation. At the time, I was lecturing in the area and assisting in the administration of an arts-education outreach program at UCLA. Like many theatre scholars fresh out of completing “the dissertation,” I found myself eager to reenter the world of practical theatre and craving to reconfirm the transformative potential of performance upon which much of my doctoral research had been based.⁷ The call for applications described the workshop as “intensive training for artists,” specializing “in the structure and implementation of a theatre-based curriculum, designed to empower incarcerated, institutionalized and other at-risk youth” (Kalesperis).

My research for what would become this study began as a participant of that workshop, wherein some twenty Los Angeles-based theatre artists and teachers were introduced to the history, goals, methodology, and programming of the company through a variety of interactive sessions; the three-day training included discussions, lectures, and hands-on enactment of ensemble-building, character-development and -improvisation games, and presented strategies for the implementation of theatre-based conflict-resolution techniques.⁸ The workshop culminated in a question-and-answer session with two young men who had completed US programs while serving time at Camp David Gonzales, a Los Angeles County-run juvenile probation school and rehabilitation facility. One of these alums, DeAndre, shared with us that since that first experience with theatre facilitated by US, he had finished his sentence and enrolled in a community college where he continued to study drama. DeAndre’s testimonial, which the title of this essay quotes, is shared on the US website: “Most people think of us as young criminals that are going to hit the penitentiary one day. For some of us that’s sadly true. But still you guys came in and turned a bunch of gang-bangin’ criminals into big kids having fun. A lot of us did not have ‘normal’ childhoods, so for you to come in and let us be young again, means a lot to me and the other guys.” DeAndre’s words succinctly express how powerful the experience of fun and the process of theatrical creation can be for troubled youth. His story and others shared at the workshop motivated my continued involvement with the company.

After completing the intensive training workshop, I served as a volunteer TA throughout two performance programs: the first with high-risk fourth- and fifth-graders; the second at a residential school for children in the foster-care system with mental health and/or behavioral issues.⁹ As a volunteer TA, I was not responsible for the development of session lesson plans, but was expected to actively engage with the participants, demonstrate the planned exercises, and enact disciplinary and ensemble-building strategies, which this essay will further detail. These in-depth, firsthand experiences working with US methods and numerous interviews with US TAs and staff, as well as traditional scholarly research in the fields of applied,

community-based, and youth theatre and Los Angeles regional socio-demographics, have informed this analysis.

The Company

Actress Laura Leigh Hughes founded US in 1993 in response to the period of significant civil unrest following the devastating Rodney King riots, with the intention of fostering community unification. According to its website, US has grown throughout the past two decades, now serving over 300 at-risk and incarcerated youths annually; it has continued to work toward the company's founding mission, which is "to empower youth in underserved and at-risk environments with the means and methods necessary to explore personal and social conflicts and develop self-esteem, communication and coping skills to make positive life choices and to be . . . productive member(s) of the community." The company practices a "theory of change" through the collaborative performance process, operating under the belief that any of the youth participants are capable of turning around their lives, and changing anti-social or self-destructive behavior (US 2011a).

US's programming has had noticeable success, reporting the results of a 2008 survey conducted by UCLA professor of social welfare Laura Abrams that 71 percent of participating youth agreed that the program "increased their commitment to school. . . . 64% responded that their grades and test scores had improved," and an "average of 80% of participants agreed that US helped them learn how to avoid physical confrontation" (US 2011c). As Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki point out in their editorial "Drama for Change? Prove It! Impact Assessment in Applied Theatre," there are limits to the accuracy of materials designed to evaluate arts programs and applied theatre, partially because assessment tools often focus on the immediate impact of a given program, but do not adequately address "alterations in attitude and behavior that are registered in the long term, sometimes over years" (140).¹⁰ Like most nonprofit organizations that rely on grant funding, however, US must show that its programming is "evidence-based," despite the limitations of this to arts-assessment practices. Abrams's results have been largely consistent with the qualitative evaluations of the program given through personal testimony by the participants, program alums, TAs, and the hosting institutions' program facilitators.

This essay will discuss three elements of the US praxis, which I believe allow the company to realize its goals of effecting positive social change in its participants' lives by disrupting hegemonic power dynamics normally associated with interventionist programs designed for at-risk youth. First, the TAs allow considerable creative ownership to their participants, offering the tools and structure for them to work as an ensemble to develop any story and characters they imagine without an outside artistic agenda. Second, the program illustrates its theory of change by treating each person with the utmost respect and recognizing these individuals' subjectivity, even in terms of disciplinary methods. The TAs utilize an approach that I call "passive discipline" based on creating mutual respect, which will be explained below. Finally, US employs violence-prevention strategies connected to the theatrical concept of ensemble. The violence-prevention/ensemble-building strategies actively used redefine the concepts of community and family for the youth participants to include positive, productive relationships based on equality and respect, while they call on ensemble members to renounce destructive, hierarchical relationships based on domination and brutality.

The program advocates for social change, but within existing societal/civic perimeters of safe and legal behavior.¹¹ The type of social change that US facilitates is that of individual empowerment, rather than

more broadly reaching systemic transformation. US does not campaign for revolution (indeed, the illegality and deviance of gang activity could be considered far more revolutionary); instead, the US process aims to strengthen self-esteem, provide the experience of play, and encourage the creative, collaborative thinking of the individual youth in order to activate the potential to make changes in his or her life. Significantly, throughout a given US program, the participating youths, who may normally be rendered powerless by constraining social structures, are treated with respect and are afforded creative license and the space and time to have fun. Although impossible to prove, the potential long-term impact of completing a US program could be profound, because after learning to communicate and cooperate with others and experiencing play and accomplishment, participants may renegotiate their roles within the educational, economic, and civic system in a manner that could provide them with increased opportunities for personal achievement. From this new empowered position, these individuals can begin to transform systemic issues of social inequity.

(Re)defining Community

“Community” can be defined in seemingly countless ways, but usually it is understood to signify a group of people who share certain circumstances, interests, or traits. In her important article “A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre,” Sonja Kuftinec states that “[w]e generally understand community as a function of commonality, whether that commonality is one of location, class, interest, age, or ethnic background.” Drawing from cultural theorists like Albert Cohen, Paul Gilroy, and Iris Marion Young, Kuftinec points out that in order “for a community to distinguish itself, its members must differentiate themselves in some way from other communities” (92). In this way, a community defines itself both by who is included (commonality) and who is excluded (exclusion). This definition is especially relevant in the analysis of how gangs form and function. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), “gangs are often the result of system failures or community dysfunction” (10). The historical genealogy of youth involvement in gangs in the United States, as well as the myriad reasons an individual may join a gang, is beyond the scope of this essay.¹² However, US and the LA Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) program, which frequently contracts with US, aim to address the findings that youth are more likely to join gangs when they come from economically disadvantaged communities. “Poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and overall economic isolation and lack of opportunity,” as well as the experience of “racism, political exclusion, and social marginalization,” are commonly blamed for the development of and youth involvement in gangs (Dunworth, Hayeslip, Lyons, and Denver 6). These disadvantaged youth who are likely to have troubled relationships with adult authority figures can access a feeling of community by belonging to a gang. This community is sustained by communal gang activity, including exercising loyalty to one’s gang by excluding members of other gangs—often through violence.

If we understand community as a function of both commonality and exclusion, one of US’s most important goals is to recognize the disparate communities to which the participants belong at the start of the program, which often divide along lines of gang affiliation and/or racial and cultural identification, and disrupt these affiliations by creating a new type of community: the theatrical ensemble (Kuftinec 92). US works to create an unlikely ensemble from people who initially might define themselves, at least partially, by their perceived difference to others in the group. Through repeated ensemble-building exercises, which take the specific social contexts into account, US intervenes in the intensely stratified youth gang culture by providing a common experience of play. For many of these at-risk and incarcerated minors, the opportunity *to play* itself is transformative; playing provides them with a break from the more serious aspects of their lives, which are often marked by difficult experiences with authority figures and structures, and may assist

the process of establishing a new kind of community with their peers in the program that is based on the common experience of having fun.

The importance of fun and play is highlighted in the US workshop curriculum, which states that making “this session fun” is the first goal of the session 1 lesson plan (US 2011b). TAs are trained to “plan the sessions to keep things fun and lively, especially at the beginning. We want to avoid the feeling that the participants are in school” (US 2011a). The programs introduce the basic principles of ensemble, improvisation, and characterization through a series of focus and improvisation exercises like “Energy 1-10,” “Simon Says,” “What Are You Doing?” and “Accepting Circle,” created by theatre educator, director, and actress Viola Spolin (US 2008, 33–35).¹³ Because some of the older groups may be resistant to participating in these kinds of games, US brings several extra volunteer TAs to model the game-playing for the first few sessions of a program. The presence of these additional enthusiastic players helps defuse the feeling that the youth participants are in the spotlight, as they explore these new theatrical methods of expression. In my experience of volunteering with junior high school students in Pacoima, California, I observed that in addition to introducing physical characterization, comic exaggeration, projection, and listening skills, the rules of basic theatre games appear to provide sufficient structure for the participants not to feel foolish by acting like kids.

As the weeks continue, the participants seem to recognize that play, fun, and silliness are respected and appreciated in the space and time of their US sessions. The exercises used are designed to promote bonding, confidence, and self-esteem and are intended to cultivate a new, shared interest in theatre and the theatre-making process for the participants. At its best, the US program can help at-risk and/or incarcerated youths form a community around theatrical creation, rather than bonding over other aspects of their situations, which could lead to destructive relationships and behaviors.

The US Program and Praxis

Since 2007, US has staffed and supported twelve programs annually. The methodology is clear-cut and consistent, grounded in familiar principles of community-centered theatre. Here, I draw from Laura Wiley and David Feiner’s explanation of “community-based scene development” as a process “in which community members participate fully in turning stories they tell into performance” (122). US employs professional film and theatre practitioners as TAs, who work in teams with the youth participants, modeling an ensemble approach to theatre production that is fully participatory and inquiry based. While there are certain necessary limitations on the content and tone of the work, which will be explained shortly, the participants are afforded considerable creative license from start to finish over script development.

US runs two types of programs, which are usually linked and designed to retain participants from one program to the next whenever possible. The first is a ten-week, twenty-session writing program, in which participants learn theatre and playwriting basics. It culminates in an original play written by the group through a series of individual and group writing exercises. The second program, also produced over twenty sessions, concerns performance, in which participants learn acting and performance basics and ultimately rehearse and perform the play written in the preceding program for an audience of their peers. Occasionally, these programs will be combined and the participants will write and perform a one-act play by the end of the program. Although they are beyond the scope of this study, the specific guidelines and corresponding lesson plans of the artistic process for script development and rehearsal processes are detailed and made

publicly available in the curriculum section of US's website (US 2011a), where the following key elements are given, which must be included in each lesson plan:

1. *Checking In*: Each session, artists "check in" with participants to get a feel for their state of mind before continuing. This is briefly performed to be certain there are no large problems that need to be addressed with a participant before delving into an activity.
2. *Warm-ups*: Each session begins with a warm-up that lasts from between ten to twenty minutes. There are several pages of sample warm-ups (see US 2011a), but artists are free to include their own favorites, and are encouraged to add them to the curriculum at a later time.
3. *Core Activity*: The main block of time in each session will be used for exploring a core activity.
4. *State Standards*: Each warm-up and core activity addresses State of California Educational Standards for Theatre. These standards are noted at each activity, which helps TAs at each site to integrate the program with their curriculum and site staff members to give credit to participants for their proficiency in the state's performing and visual arts standards.
5. *Violence Prevention Strategies*: Many of the proposed activities address violence-prevention strategies. These are noted in the text below. It is important to be aware of these, since the program is considered to be not only an arts program, but also a violence-prevention program.
6. *Cool-Down Period*: This activity can be taken from the warm-ups. Each lesson plan is designed to build on the ideas learned in the previous session in order to introduce major theatrical concepts, to build trust among the participants, and to advance the program to its ultimate goal of a finished script and/or performance.

The methodology for script development and the goals of the program overall deviate from those of many other community-based or documentary-theatre companies, because the participants are encouraged to create and develop almost any characters or stories they can imagine. A significant caveat is that they may not glorify violence or drug use and may not reference real-life gang affiliations, although they are encouraged to present the pain and anger that their past decisions have caused them. The participants are at once encouraged to explore the challenges and reasons behind their life circumstances, and yet must work within boundaries deemed "appropriate" and "productive" for the given ensemble and US program. On the one hand, these constraints can be seen as problematically conservative, as they restrain the participants from full authorial control over the work in favor of stories more amenable to the goal of rehabilitation; but on the other, the mandated omission of real-life gang affiliations and glorified violence enables participants from disparate backgrounds to create collaboratively and function safely as an ensemble, requiring that the interests, concerns, and experiences of individuals be reworked into more general terms that are shared and/or appreciated by the ensemble as a whole. (This provision also allows US to meet its goals as a nonprofit, funding dependent educational program dedicated to gang prevention and behavioral rehabilitation.) In other words, these are their stories, although they are not necessarily based on real-life events or people. If participants wish to write a murder-mystery farce with ghosts and super-villains, as they did in the Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services facility's 2009 production "The Abandoned Hotel," they can. At other times, the material can be more thematically autobiographical and gritty. But howsoever the works take shape, the TAs constantly remind participants that the process and product belongs to them. The sessions are designed to emphasize participants' gifts of invention, thereby promoting cooperation and compromise by taking care that every voice is heard before the ensemble makes a final creative decision.

This process, which provides the opportunity for these disadvantaged and marginalized participants to actively create, can be read as an example of applied theatre as conceived by Etherton and Prentki: “applied theatre is by definition a political activity because it is about interventions that attempt to make changes in power relations among individuals and within societies” (150). In their editorial to a special issue of TDR on social theatre, James Thompson and Richard Schechner argue that although the sites where social theatre performances may take place, such as jails, schools, or war zones, may not be traditional theatre venues, they are “in fact sites of multiple performances. . . . What the most effective social theatre does is to rub up against and reveal the performative in the setting, complementing or undermining it, challenging or further heightening it” (13). By allowing the participants relative creative control over the scripts and encouraging them to tell their own stories, US changes the power relations normally experienced by these youths—the process affirms that their voices and ideas matter. When US performs a play written by inmates in a lockdown probation facility, it is reassigning the highly performative space in terms of the inmates’ design; they are agents communicating their own narratives, which increases their sense of subjectivity.

The limits that are placed on the playwriting participants’ are connected to the necessities of cooperative ensemble work; specific gang references and overtly graphic displays of violence would clearly violate the ethos of respect at the heart of such work, and these topics and gestures could catalyze destructive behavior within the working space. Additionally, the writers must learn to negotiate individual desires to collectively decide on the shape of scenes, characters, and overall plot in a given play. In this way, the program emphasizes establishing an ensemble among unlikely individuals through the collaborative process of theatre—an often daunting goal, since any given program may contain participants from rival gangs who might literally shoot one another in the street if they were not incarcerated.

The TAs avoid violent conflict and promote teamwork within the lockdown facilities by implementing a system of “passive discipline” and a rather aggressive adherence to a working definition of ensemble authored by the group at the start of the program. I will detail this process for two reasons: first, the work of US is about the process and not the final product—or, in the words of London-based critic Claire Bishop, US can be seen as “less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity” (178; emphasis in original); and second, I believe it is the company’s systematic process that successfully disrupts the gang mentality and reinvigorates participants’ perception of what community should be.

At the start of a performance workshop, the TAs introduce the concept of ensemble generally by comparing it to the idea of a sports team, and by conducting a series of activities that help to build the ensemble. On day 1, the TAs gently remind participants that they have chosen to participate and thank them for being there, applauding them for their good behavior that afforded them such an opportunity. After the TAs have led several trust- and team-building drama games, the group is gathered together and instructed to sit down in front of a poster-sized sheet of paper. At this point, the TAs introduce the term “ensemble,” and then they ask each participant to propose a rule that will help the group work together effectively and respectfully. After the group has heard and agreed on the proposed rule, the participant writes the rule on the paper with a marker of variously colored ink. This sheet outlines the rules for the working ensemble and is visible at every session during the ensuing weeks and will be frequently revisited throughout the process.

If at any time during the ten-week program an event or behavior occurs that is disruptive to the process, the TAs gather the group around the rule sheet and ask the participants to add a new rule to the sheet that will prevent such disruption. This way, the rules become an opportunity for individual and collective needs to be heard and affirmed; the disciplinary structures that might normally be perceived as curtailing personal freedom and expression become themselves an avenue for building self-esteem, encouraging cooperation,

and fostering creative authorship. A few rules that are always added to the sheet early on in a program are: “No gang signs,” “No gang disses,” “No ‘fronting,’” “No pushing,” and “No hitting.” Many of the TAs have shared with me that nearly all of the time, participants are relieved to have these rules, being relieved to have a “break” from their tremendous and constant efforts to display loyalty to their gangs; participants are relieved to have this chance to forego their gang identity and play like children.

Despite US’s innovative approach to collective rule-making, disciplinary issues naturally arise. The overall format of the sessions, including the TA-to-participant ratio, has been designed to help keep the process moving along as smoothly as possible and to retain participants from one session to the next. Each session is lead by a team of TAs that always includes at least three trained individuals on the company payroll and, when possible, up to three volunteers. The team must utilize a highly structured and specialized system of discipline and reinforcement—passive discipline—because of the unique challenges the participants’ circumstances pose. If there are members of rival gangs within the same program, the simple task of forming a circle, for example, can be extremely difficult.

In the 2008 TA training workshop, resident TAs modeled an initial session for workshop participants by enacting possible scenarios that might arise and demonstrating their approach to classroom management. Matt Oduña, who had worked as a TA for over five years, said that “it is imperative to keep in mind that we are guests in their home. Whatever happens in this room, we get to leave, but the guys have to face each other in the dorms and the hallways afterwards. It’s all about showing them respect.” This ethos of respect becomes apparent as soon as two students begin to get rough with each other or act out, one of the three TAs quietly intervening as the instructing TA continues with the lesson plan. If truly dangerous behavior begins, a peace officer or counselor will remove the perpetrator from the room. Interestingly, TAs never publicly call out or confront a student for his or her misbehavior. Direct confrontation could be construed by participants as “‘fronting,” which within gang culture requires a measure of retaliation that is equal to or greater than what prompts it. Instead, the issue is dealt with in one of three ways.

The first act of passive discipline is that a TA simply moves next to the person causing the disruption, then after the behavior stops, the TA, amid instruction, might make a general comment to the group about talking out of turn, cursing, flashing gang signs, making gang-related “disses,” violating personal boundaries, displaying gang poses, and so on. The TA always relates the problem back to the original rules the group made together, and as soon as there is a collective understanding the next lesson or game begins. The second course of action involves the instructing TA to continue the lesson plan while another TA quietly and respectfully whispers to the individual causing the problem to step outside of the circle. At this point, the TA will whisper a nonconfrontational comment, generally preceded with an apology—for example, “Hey man, I’m really sorry but . . .”—followed by a reminder that “we can’t have [the particular behavior] while we’re trying to get work done” or that “it’s really hard for me to concentrate on what [the instructing TA’s name] is saying when [the particular behavior] is going on.” The training workshop emphasizes that these statements must be executed in a tone of sincere respect in order to ensure that the participants that US aims to reach may be retained from one session to the next. Finally, if the disruption continues or becomes increasingly dangerous, the participant will be asked to leave the program for the day.

I include this detailed methodology of passive discipline because it is instrumental to the company’s ability to effect social change and modify participants’ perceptions of authority, community, and their own subjectivity. By using this unique form of classroom management based on respect and deference, US recognizes participants as individuals capable of either choosing to support the ensemble through their actions or else leaving the program for the day.

Adjusting Praxis to Meet the Needs of the Population Served

Gangs in Los Angeles have historically been comprised of racialized Others, and the gangs often divide along racial lines. With dramatically changing demographics due to immigration and population growth over the past two decades, Los Angeles has witnessed a shift from a majority of African American gangs to now one of Latino or Hispanic gangs (Dunworth, Hayeslip, Lyons, and Denver 25). By design, US is not specifically a Hispanic or African American theatre organization, although its mission and praxis address the needs of its largest demographic, Hispanic youth in Los Angeles.

Many Hispanic neighborhoods are so disproportionately fraught with gang activity that a series of city, state, and federal programs have been put in place to keep the minors who live in these areas out of the gangs that run them. In 2007, LA mayor Antonio Villaraigosa created the GRYD program, which identifies zones or neighborhoods that qualify for localized gang prevention, intervention, and reentry programs.¹⁴ These zones or neighborhoods are often home to multigenerational gangs, some of which target children as young as age 7 for recruitment (OJJDP 4). I witnessed one example of the urgency of the situation for these children at a US/GRYD program in Pacoima, where I broke up a fight between two 10-year-old boys over which neighborhood *clica* was more deadly and therefore better to join.¹⁵ (Ironically, the argument grew out of the two disagreeing over which “superpower” was cooler, to be invisible or to be able to fly.)

The “Community Needs Assessment and Resource Mapping” report summarizes the results of a survey conducted in the Pacoima Foothill GRYD zone:

Respondents in interviews and focus groups discussed the difficult economic environment in their neighborhood, and repeatedly stated that lack of educational and work opportunities in the community created a climate conducive to gang recruitment. The lack of job and training opportunities, combined with a strong gang presence in some neighborhoods have created a situation, as one informant indicated, in which youth have begun to perceive gangs as a career alternative—one of the few choices available to them to increase their economic opportunities.

The majority of the survey respondents also said that racial and economic issues, as well as “the lack of [a] strong family structure,” were causes of gang prevalence in their neighborhood. The desire and perceived need for a family unit, sense of belonging, and affirmation of selfhood, in addition to the lack of educational and employment opportunities, at least partially explain the motivation behind youths’ gang initiation and membership, and the overwhelming epidemic of gang activity.

It is important to note that there are both male and female gang members who identify in every racial group; however, Hispanic male minors and adults currently make up the overwhelming majority within the Los Angeles County probation system. Many of these Hispanic minors in the system are either first- or second-generation immigrants who feel grossly disenfranchised by the educational system and lack of job opportunities. In a survey conducted by US in 2007, which surveyed seventy-one youths in LA probation camps, 73 percent claimed gang affiliation, and 76 percent identified as Hispanic. The survey’s summary of findings indicates that the youths’ perceived barriers to educational attainment were life circumstances, negative influences, and practical needs. When we discuss the high percentages of Hispanics involved with gangs, we must also consider the egregious socioeconomic inequities experienced in many of these communities. The Pew Hispanic Center’s most recent “Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States,

2008” reports that 19.5 percent of all Hispanics live under the poverty level, which is, by comparison, more than twice the percentage of all white people who live in poverty in the United States. The same report shows that a devastating 26.4 percent of all Hispanics younger than age 18 live in poverty, as compared to 10 percent of all white minors.

Additionally, many young Hispanics face linguistic challenges to educational success in a primarily English-language educational system.¹⁶ Youths who struggle with poverty and perceive themselves as failures within a dominant society that devalues racially marked or linguistically different individuals often are plagued with self-esteem issues, anti-social/criminal thinking, substance abuse, and low self-control. US’s curriculum directly addresses these issues through its emphasis on ensemble-building, respect, and violence prevention.

US integrates violence-prevention strategies throughout its daily lesson plans and overall project curriculum. The specific vocabulary, exercises, and lesson objectives, however, focus on teaching the concept of ensemble as the most important aspect of theatre production. All of the exercises in a given session are scaffolded: that is, designed to build off each other in order to introduce violence prevention strategies and a performing arts vocabulary based on California State Standards for Theatre and Creative Writing (US 2011c). The TAs are trained to teach through inquiry, continuously asking participants why they think they have just performed an activity. Because US seeks to provide its participants with an experience of success, there are no wrong answers and TAs praise individuals for taking part in discussions. The inquiry method allows participants to review what they have just learned casually, without feeling as though they are being tested or put on the spot. Asking the group questions about the terms and concepts introduced also provides the TAs with a platform to relate the previous exercise to the overall concept of ensemble, and enforces productive discourse among the participants.

The “Fist of Five” consensus-building tool is another example of how building an ensemble is linked with violence prevention. The Fist of Five method gives each student a range of votes with specific rules attached: a fist is a block; if someone raises a fist the idea cannot go forward, but that person must explain his or her objection; one raised finger means that the idea is not liked at all, but it does not have to be explained; two through five fingers raised means the idea is liked to that respective degree (two being the lowest, five being the highest). Consensus is reached when there are no fists and more points are awarded to a particular idea than to the competing one (US 2008, 55). The students learn that in order to make productive creative decisions as a group they must reach a consensus, not just a majority, which emphasizes how constructive team thinking and individual input can improve an idea. Fist of Five allows each person to voice his or her opinion and experience a nonconfrontational method for problem resolution, while reinforcing the importance of each individual’s input. The participant learns how to uphold his/her agency as part of a community that is based on negotiation and collective cooperation, instead of fear, intimidation, or violence.

A Model for Theatrical Intervention

Unfortunately, it is difficult to quantify how successful these programs are in changing the youths’ lives, as they are often also receiving counseling and benefiting from other educational programs. While US makes an effort to report quantitative evidence for the efficacy of its programming, like many other arts programs, the most convincing evidence is qualitative and best observed throughout the process of each program. At the end of each writing program, the company enlists professional actors to perform a staged

reading of the ensemble's play in front of the playwrights, the playwrights' peers, and invited guests. The participants in the performance program are empowered to perform an original play in front of their peers, family, and friends. Whenever possible, those who have participated in the writing program are invited to continue with US in the performance one, and the participants will be cast in the play they helped to write. After the finale of each program, the participants are given certificates of completion and celebrate with the company.

At this point, each participant and TA shares what he or she learned and what their favorite part of the experience was. Although the testimonials cannot easily be translated to hard statistics, these final reflections indicate tremendous growth in the participants. The US website features testimonials from several program alumni that describe the positive impact of their experience. One alumnus from the Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility says, "I learned to work with others different from me. I admit that when you combine a lot of ideas together, you end up with an immaculate piece of work. I've learned to create something special, despite my current situation, and challenge the stereotypes that have been placed on me!" Another alumnus, R. J., from the 2009 summer program at the David Gonzales Probation Camp, reflects on his experience of becoming a team player and sticking to the process despite personal circumstances: "I've never been part of a team before. I wanted to quit so many times. There was a lot going on at home and I wanted to just worry by myself. But the Unusual Suspects really helped me to keep motivated. This is a really big deal for me. I've never had anyone support me the way you have." Here, former participants voice their appreciation for the chance to play, the opportunity to have their ideas heard and valued, and the experience to complete a creative project and experience success.

The US process celebrates these young people as active, creative subjects who can contribute to and take pride in the completion of projects of their own designs. In addition to learning basic theatrical concepts, the participants have practiced certain skills of negotiation, compromise, and conflict resolution, and hopefully have gained a better sense of how they as individuals can work with others productively and safely. It remains uncertain if they will continue to develop the skills introduced by US in their personal lives and communities. Unfortunately, the systemic material inequities many of these individuals face have not been altered nor even directly addressed by US and its praxis. Whether the company is successful in achieving its overarching mission "to empower youth . . . and develop self-esteem, communication and coping skills to make positive life choices" can only be determined after following the life-paths of program alums, case by case and over time (US 2011c).

As a theatre practitioner-academic who has spent a great deal of time working with US's methods and some fifty youth participants, I can attest that the company's theory of change has merit; attitudes about group work, theatre, and the creative process shifted dramatically for many of the individuals who continued in the program to its culmination. My hope is that these young people who were able to actively engage with the creative process, the ensemble, and its rules have gained a perspective that will translate to other areas of their lives, despite the difficult social circumstances they face. And while "evidence" of participants' long-term transformations may be an important company goal, the process—the positive experience of play, collaboration, and creation—is valuable in itself.

US's praxis offers one example of how a community-centered ensemble theatre can actively intervene in the seemingly ineradicable LA gang system. US and its participants perform positive relationships based on mutual respect, creative collaboration, and individual and group affirmation. Minors that have previously relied on the united "front" by constantly performing their gang affiliations and loyalty now have the opportunity to tell and write their individual stories, to have fun with their peers, and to be heard and affirmed for nonconfrontational, creative, and both independent and collaborative thinking. By operating

as an ensemble across racial lines and even gang affiliations, the participants break from performing the roles determined by gang mores, and they gain perspective on their own subjectivity.

Notes

1. DeAndre, Camp David Gonzales Probation Camp youth participant, Unusual Suspects Theatre Company, Los Angeles. See the testimonials on the US website (2011c).
2. The section titled “The Need” on the US website includes these statistics, which are cited from the “Gang Crimes” section of the Los Angeles County District Attorney Office’s website.
3. According to the Los Angeles County Probation Department’s website, placement in one of the eighteen county-run probation camps “provides intensive intervention in a residential treatment setting.” These camps provide minors with treatments and programming, including counseling, education, vocational training, literacy programs, specialized tutoring, and “various types of social enrichment.” The probation camp system is regarded as a last step before minors are placed in the California Youth Authority, which houses juvenile offenders deemed as serious threats to the community and unsuitable for participation in probation camps or other local programs (Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council 5).
4. Terry Dunworth and colleagues explain the Youth Services Eligibility Tool (YSET) as “an interview protocol developed by gang researchers for the GRYD (Gang Reduction and Youth Development) office (of Los Angeles) to measure levels of risk across a number of domains among youth referred for prevention services. Levels of risk are calculated by researchers at the University of Southern California (USC) to decide whether referred youth are eligible for services” (x).
5. A full list of US funders is published on the US website.
6. At the time of this case study, each of these programs included 24 two-hour sessions, completed over twelve weeks, with additional hours for tech week and performances. In 2009, US shifted its programs to be run over ten weeks in order to accommodate the scheduling needs of several of its partner programs and institutions.
7. My dissertation, “Clashes of Cultural Memory in Popular Festival Performance in Southern California: 1910s–Present” examines how Native American and Chicana/o culture is generated, transformed, and sustained through theatre and public festival performance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Southern California (see Elkin).
8. The games and strategies introduced in the workshop were based on California State Standards for Visual and Performing Arts and the US curriculum and can be found in US’s *Teacher Training Artist Intensive 2008* (workbook) (see US 2008, 2011a, 2011b).
9. The first performance program in which I participated was at the Pacoima Elementary Charter School in Pacoima, California, and consisted of fourth- and fifth-graders identified as at-risk for future gang recruitment. This program ran from the week of 2 September 2008 through the tech and performance week of 3 November 2008. The participants of my second performance program (5 January 2009–27 March 2009) were ninth through twelfth-graders at the Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services facility. Vista Del Mar is a residential and educational facility in Culver City, California, for children in the foster-care system experiencing mental health, behavioral, emotional, or social problems (see Vista Del Mar’s website). I also had the opportunity to participate in and observe several sessions of a performance program at Pacoima’s Charles MacLay Middle School, which ran 26 February 2009–25 June 2009, with sixth- through eighth-graders identified as being at high risk for future gang involvement and were enrolled in the GRYD program.

10. For a thorough analysis of contemporary impact assessments of applied theatre programs in the UK, with particular emphasis on the challenges of assessing short-, medium-, and long-term impacts, see Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki, "Editorial: Drama for Change? Prove It! Impact Assessment in Applied Theatre."
11. I here define "safe" behavior as that which does not cause physical or psychological harm to one's self or another person.
12. For further research on the history of gangs in the United States, see James C. Howell and John P. Moore's *History of Street Gangs in the United States*. For an in-depth analysis of contemporary gang-membership patterns, see Malcolm W. Klein and Cheryl L. Maxson's *Street Gang Patterns and Policies* and James C. Howell's *Youth Gangs: An Overview*.
13. These and many of the other exercises used by US can be found in US's *Teacher Training Artist Intensive 2008* (workbook) (31–53) and in US's Curriculum A and Curriculum B.
14. According to Harder+Company Community Research's report "Community Needs Assessment and Resource Mapping—Pacoima-Foothill Gang Reduction and Youth Development Zone," the following neighborhoods have been identified as GRYD zones: Ramona Gardens, East Los Angeles; Cypress Park/Northeast, Los Angeles; Pacoima-Foothill, San Fernando Valley; and Newton, Baldwin Village, and Florence-Graham/77th, South Los Angeles.
15. *Clica* is a Spanish slang word that translates as "gang."
16. The Pew Hispanic Center's "Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2008" shows that 17 percent of Hispanics under age 18 fall under the category of "English spoken less than very well (at home)."

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