

As an independent educator, Eve Nussbaum Soumerai has developed numerous theatrical tributes to inspirational historical figures (Anne Frank, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Dalai Lama, for example). By participating in these productions, young people learn about the lives of these figures and share these stories with large numbers of their peers. Soumerai uses the process of developing and performing these plays as a form of youth leadership education.

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Arts-Based leadership: Theatrical tributes

Eve Nussbaum Soumerai with Rachel Mazer

THE ARTS PLAY a vital role in the maturation process of our youth. The arts permit freedom of expression in its fullest sense once the evident abilities of individual students merge with those in their inner, yet-to-be-discovered selves. Multimedia read-through plays and tributes to individuals such as Thurgood Marshall, Anne Frank, the Dalai Lama, and Harriet Tubman enable youth to walk through the lives of the honorees while discovering the consequences and importance of individual choice. A group setting and freedom from competition promote the ability to lead. The ethical dimension and awareness of societal needs are fundamental components of tributes and govern the multimedia celebration process.

Origin

On June 30, 1939, I said goodbye to my family, forever, in a crowded waiting room of the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin, Germany. Everybody around us was weeping, including my mother. I had but one desire, to leave the scene and go home, but my father, as usual, broke the spell. He smiled, looked straight at me, and said, “You know what?” “What?” I said. “As soon as I get home, I’ll write you a long letter,” while my sniffling younger brother, Bibi, took the opportunity to ask me for the tenth time to buy him a pair of boxing gloves in England, where I was headed on one of the last Kindertransports to leave Germany. I was thirteen years old and did not yet know how happy I had been, in spite of the Nazis, because of the cocoon my loving family had provided. Two days later I found out. My English guardians, although they wanted to save me from certain death, never had had a child and believed in strict rules and absolutely no frills or “luxuries” such as ice cream or having a friend over more than once a month. I never dared to mention Bibi’s desire for boxing gloves.

Two years later, letters and Red Cross messages from my parents had stopped and I stopped caring whether I lived or died. I had become a nuisance. My guardians took me out of school and put me on a train to a residential London County Council nursery school outside of London. I became a helper, and two days after my arrival I again developed an appetite for life. Why? Because I had an intuitive love for children that I inherited from my father, who had spent much of his time with me and my friends. He would tell us stories with funny endings that gave us the ability to listen and laugh while an old phonograph played scratchy records in the corner of our living room. My mother loved Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which, she told me over and over again he composed after having been deaf for ten years. “Inner music can overcome terrible things and focus on all human beings becoming brothers.” She would sing “*Alle Menschen werden Brueder*,” right along with the scratches, made sure I learned some poems by heart, and appreciated the stars, the moon, and the prayers in my black, pocket-sized prayer book.

Searching for answers to what had happened to my family was my major reason for joining the American army of occupation as an Allied civilian employee. I was stationed in Munich near the Foerenwald displaced persons camp. I was eighteen years old and totally unprepared for what I saw and learned on my visits there. But one day I was introduced to a French resistance fighter who had, for a time, worked alongside Albert Camus, editor of the underground paper COMBAT. What I discovered about Camus gave me comfort and energy. Goodness did exist and so did courage. His about-to-be-published book *La Peste* (The Plague) became a blueprint for tribute celebrations, my life's activity. In *La Peste* (a code word for evil, including the Holocaust), everyone is equal and participates—the alcoholic clerk, the physician, the priest, and the anarchist—all help to alleviate suffering and as a result become good, nonjudgmental, dependable friends.

The beginning of multimedia tributes

In 1972, Albert Camus became the very first “guide” honoree at Conard High School, West Hartford, Connecticut. No one had heard of him when I, as newly appointed activities director, suggested we write and produce a tribute honoring him. “Come in and Camus!” became the message in the daily school bulletin. And come in they did in droves, ninety of them, including a school choir that had never before been featured. It was a case of *egalité* and *fraternité*. They read the texts, wrote the script, designed posters, took photographs, and calligraphied Camus’ philosophy focusing on justice, honesty, friendship, and love of life on appropriate backgrounds to be used in the form of slides in the production. Albert Camus became the midwife to their creative energies. They argued, sometimes till midnight. They took over. I, the dreamer, became the referee. It was as though the students had been waiting for just such an occasion to find their personal, creative “meaning.”

My goal was not to foster youth leadership but rather a way to survive. It became an immersion process for all of us using our individual gifts and tools—hence the multimedia process. Just as in *The*

Plague, everyone was welcome. We all became “brothers” (and sisters!) and contributed to the whole, each in our own way. Some enjoyed being “gofers,” others enjoyed cleaning up; some were in the orchestra, all were in the chorus; the emerging student directors were in charge and in consultation with the “gang.”

Multimedia tributes thrive

Many honorees followed Albert Camus: Mark Twain, Hans Christian Andersen, Martin Luther King Jr., John Lennon, Thurgood Marshall, Anne Frank, and Harriet Tubman, to name but a few—folks you can rely on not to disappear, because once we have “met” them, they live permanently in our imagination and are always ready to cheer and inspire us like loving parents.

Multimedia tributes are now officially in their thirty-fourth year. There have been changes because of emerging needs. I was appointed Human Rights Literacy director for the National Conference of (then) Christians and Jews. The importance of inter-district relationships between suburbs and inner cities became a priority and three years of tributes followed. Trumbull High School mentored Bridgeport Elementary School children in a tribute to Langston Hughes. The University of Bridgeport became the performance site and some of their students also volunteered, becoming leaders in the process. A tribute to Langston Hughes was followed by a tribute to the retired mayor of San Juan, Doña Felisa Rincon Gautier, in a bilingual rendition of her life. She graciously received me in her home in San Juan, where I, with her help, wrote the script. She visited Bridgeport and attended the performance.

Student leaders emerge given the appropriate environment—the challenge and the freedom to experiment, to start from scratch, to invent, to become responsible. Is that how we have managed to survive? By appropriate environment, by becoming big brothers and sisters to younger children? A sure win.

What have been the results? The following comments were made by participants in one of the earliest tributes I created and were published in the education journal *The Clearing House* in September 1976.

Steve Amstutz, of the class of 1978, with whom I am still in touch, as I am with many others, commented, “In a world in which so much of life consists of depression and pain, there is a mammoth need to regain confidence in humankind—an ever-increasing prerequisite for survival. . . . Tributes accomplish this by showing man to be basically good; the expression of a much needed outlook.”

Sculptor Ana Flores, of the class of 1976, from whom you may hear separately, said, “A mild breeze ruffled our hair on the commodious veranda of the Mark Twain house. This event started my involvement with the art aspect of the Tribute. . . . I began to understand how much students want to know and then share . . . and how they must be given an outlet for their creativity.”

Teresa Glennon, of the class of 1977, said, “I was able to use my brain to make my body work. . . . Dancing is a totally different expression than writing or speech. . . . Everything just flowed together the night of the performance. The bond between the cast and the audience was so strong . . . it was more than a show; it was a celebration.”

Paul Lundberg, of the class of 1976, said, “I played Dr. Rieux in the tribute to Albert Camus. After one particular taping session we talked far into the night. . . . This tape would cheer me countless times during my first difficult year at college.”

A Hartford inner-city fourth grader offered his assessment in 2002 of the tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.: “My feelings about our play are that white people are no better than black people. Our play showed this in the part when the whole school sang ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Black and white people were holding hands and singing. I think that was the best part. I also think that our audience’s favorite part was when Martin and Coretta got married. We got a lot of letters saying that. They also said they

liked our singing. One person sang in every song. I think the whole school loved our performance.”

I will end with a wish and a feeling, as written by fourth graders Eli and other unsigned students on March 30, 2004: “I wish that the world will be a better place. I would stick up for the inisent. Why do people feel they have to cuase each other pain? (It dose hurt.) I wish I knew.”

“If not now, when?”

Rachel Mazer helped create and perform a tribute to Golda Meir in the spring of 2003. Here she discusses her experiences with producing tributes.

I am Rachel Mazer, a freshman at the University of Vermont. Through my personal experiences I have learned that leadership is not a formula. It is a spark that is ignited within an individual and improved through trial and error. Two years ago in Yachad, the Hebrew High School I attended, I was lucky enough to be introduced to teacher and Holocaust survivor Eve Soumerai. I had been told that she was looking for students to research and write a tribute to Golda Meir. A month later, I and other volunteers had completed ten scenes and presented them in an assembly at Yachad. Before this experience with our tribute to Golda Meir, none of us knew anything about Golda and little about Israel. According to Golda’s biography, she was proudest of her role as foreign minister in Liberia. Our scene explains how agriculture and water conservation experts from Israel worked alongside Liberians; this was also a scene we presented at the Trinity Boys and Girls club with the kids there. The next tribute I worked on honored Nelson Mandela. We learned in that tribute that Mandela’s first white friend was Jewish, and that Helen Suzman, who hired Mandela at the first law firm at which he worked, was also Jewish.

This year I became co-president of UVM Hillel. Our year has been very successful, especially considering the transformation we have undergone in the way we run our organization. Last year we never had more than ten people at a Shabbat dinner. This year we have not had an event that drew fewer than ten people, and attendance at our events has averaged around thirty people. The Chanukah party we had in our Fall 2004 semester was the first time we ever had an event that large. It drew 125 people and was a boost that kept UVM Hillel thriving. This semester we have already decided to start tributes here on campus. Our first tribute will be on 2004 Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, who was honored for her “Trees for Democracy” project.

My generation needs to realize that we are the future and that the world will soon be left in our hands. We need to be brave enough to take on that responsibility and reach out to others. This is especially important on college campuses where anti-Semitism is prevalent, and we can use the production of tributes as a solution. When a dance is choreographed that includes the traditional Jewish dance the horah and traditional African dances, and is done with inner-city children, a sense of joy and pride is fostered in both the producers and the participants.

That is why art is so important. It allows us to use our creative energy and unites us. Most important, once the arts are introduced into the tribute, the fun the children are having is evident in their faces, in their delighted eyes. The arts are the vital element that allows us to lead people into learning through this energy.

Tzedek, Tikkun Olam, and the constant battle for social justice are Jewish values and goals that make Hillel a legendary organization and give Jews a new avenue to explore their Judaism. As Rabbi Hillel said, “One who is shy cannot learn because he is afraid to ask questions.” In accordance with that statement, Rabbi Hillel would love tribute celebrations because they include everybody and do not include competition. Questions, discussions, and exploration of what issues will be important for the future of our world

are brought up and are an essential part of each of our rehearsals. Hillel would also agree with our belief, “If not now, when?”

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