Irondale Ensemble Project: Creating Community in Neo-liberal Times

Peter Duffy and Terry Greiss

> *For me acting is my passion, if I didn't have theatre, if I wasn't able to come on the stage, then there's no meaning of life in front of me. This helps me get by. Through the swamp of school and all that stuff, it's just like heavy and dense and then coming, being on stage and performing in front of humans is like it's liberating for me.*
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> Young Company teen ensemble Member speaking at a Talk-back after their performance of *Casablanca Reflections,* an original teen-devised piece

Abstract In recent decades, shifts in federal educational policy demand a variety of changes to how theatre companies meet their local educational goals. Since the George W. Bush administration, shifting educational policies privilege neoliberal concepts of education – that education should be standards-driven and geared to preparing twenty-first century workers. Theatre companies that work with students have been caught between seeking funding to continue their programs and doing the artistic, creative, empathic, and often-socially minded work that drives their missions. This chapter looks at how one theatre company, Brooklyn, New York's The Irondale Ensemble, has had to change, adapt and, ultimately, transform how they do their educational work in response to changes to federal educational policy.

Keywords No child left behind · Race to the top · Neoliberal educational policy · Liveness · Improvisation · Theatre · Students as artists

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The Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire reminds readers that culture seeks to either preserve or "transform social structures" (1995, p. 160). Art is never neutral; it always has a point of view. A musical like *Mame* mollifies a cultural status quo while *Hamilton* attempts to challenge it. Cultural institutions produce art that inevitably pursues one of the two goals as described by Freire. Furthermore, professor and drama therapist Nisha Sajnani elaborates Freire's idea of culture by underscoring that there is always a politics to representation through and witnessing of performance (2012, p. 190).

Like performance, education, and more specifically, educational policy is also never neutral (McLaren 1997). A curriculum is a narrative that supports systems of meaning (Au 2009). Even seemingly positive additions like "Black History Month" and "Women's History Month" to a school's instruction keep white men at the heart of the curriculum (Gore 2013, p. 58). In the end, curricula are as much political as educative. The current incarnation of education's politicization is easy to find. Neoliberal educational reformers like the Walton family and Bill and Melinda Gates endorse and fund curricula programs that focus on so-called market driven forces such as teacher and student accountability and charter schools (Reckhow and Snyder 2014). Educational critic and historian Michael Apple asserts that the neoliberal turn in educational policy supports "increasingly powerful discourses and policies […] concerning privatization, marketization, performativity, and the 'enterprising individual" (2001, p. 421). Renowned educational philosopher Henry Giroux (2014) expands on that definition stating,

> Market-driven educational reforms, with their obsession with standardization, high-stakes testing and punitive policies, also mimic a culture of cruelty and instrumental rationality that neo-liberal policies produce in the wider society. They exhibit contempt for teachers and distrust of parents, repress creative teaching, destroy challenging and imaginative programs of study, and treat students as mere inputs on an assembly line. (p. 492)

These forces impact education globally (Apple 2001). As will be discussed later in the chapter, the neo-liberal forces have reduced school districts, schools, and in particular arts education leaving many arts organizations scrambling to stay relevant.

The New York City-based Irondale Ensemble Project has been wrestling with in education tensions since its founding 34 years ago. Recent neo-liberal policy changes impacted the company profoundly over the past 10 years in particular. This chapter contextualizes Irondale within these changes in education and shows how they continue to meet their institutional goals of using performance as a language to educate and entertain and make sense of today's challenging world.

The Irondale Ensemble Project is a professional ensemble theatre company located in Brooklyn, New York. Terry Greiss, Jim Niesen and Barbara MacKenzie Wood founded Irondale in 1983 to create contemporary theatre in New York City beyond traditional Broadway fare. Currently, Irondale produces one to two major pieces of theatre each season in addition to their community projects like "To Protect, Serve and Understand" – an on-going "project that brings together civilians and police officers to create semi-improvised performances of monologues and

scenes" (irondale.org). Their main stage productions either re-imagine/reinterpret classic plays or devise new works. Irondale hires an ensemble of actors for a season who rehearse and serve in schools twice a week as teaching artists. Currently, their school programs reach about 2500 students a year which is down roughly 6000 students from the early 2000s. In comparison to other theatre companies, this number seems low but that is because Irondale commits to long-term residencies – sometimes lasting several years. Their operating budget is approximately 1 million dollars which supports the ensemble, their Young Company (a training program for actors ages 13–18), and their Junior Company (for younger actors ages 9–13). Both the Junior and Young Companies are low-cost to free theatre programs that meet once a week after school. Actors train the young actors in the same sorts of improvisational techniques that the full-time Irondale Ensemble utilizes and, like them, are tasked to create one to two new works each year.

1 Irondale: Theatre and Community

In an environment like New York City with its millions of people, opinions and scores of languages, it is a challenge to define community without essentializing it. Brunt (2001) states that

> A community is based on symbols or even attitudes, rather than concrete villages or urban neighbourhoods. In complex, pluralistic societies people have a multitude of identities that could generate the kinds of loyalties and motivations that constitutes communities. (p. 83)

As Brunt describes, communities are not monolithic identities, but rather a collection of individuals' identity markers that shift and align within situations and environments (Crenshaw 1991). Students from the same neighborhood are no more homogenous than the people sitting around our own dinner tables. Given this reality, is it possible for theatre to create community?

Irondale's artistic director, Jim Niesen is not sure. He asks,

> Is a community simply geographical? Do we make communities of interests or of mindfulness? Is that what you're really trying to reach out to in order to get a certain mass of people involved that make the community you're trying to make work? If you want to have a community of people playing soccer, to play it right you'll need, what, a community of 18 people in order to have two teams. [If you're working with people who are interested in listening to each other] making community is a continual process of being present with those people.

For Niesen, it is not enough for people to be in the same proverbial boat. He is interested in who shows up to pull on the oars to give it direction. He uses the term *tribe* to describe his vision of solidarity of intention and purpose. "Tribes are the people that get it. Communities are the people who either get it or there is the potential of them getting it."

Performance theory scholar and theatre practitioner Kuftinec (1996) helps contextualize Jim's notion of community by drawing upon, and then complicating,

Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*. She defines communitas as "the ephemeral sense of connectedness and bonding experienced by a group through the common experience of a unifying ritual" (1996, p. 94). Donald Weber adds a nuance of the dynamic nature of *communitas* saying it is "the ritual leveling process containing the potential for new social arrangements new forms of imagination, of ritualized play" (1995, p. 528). It is clear from these definitions that *communitas* centers on relationships, rituals, and common purpose.

A piece of theatre is, of course, a 'common experience of a unifying ritual,' but does that experience create a community? Kuftinec cites Anthony Cohen who suggests that a sense of *communitas* merely masks the differences within a group and creates a false sense of cohesion (1996, p. 94). While individuals have multiple identity markers, for a community to exist, its members must subscribe to commonly held "standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands" (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2010, p. 13). However, in *The Anthropology of Performance* (1986), Turner wonders whether *communitas* can ever fully emerge within a group. "It is not being realized precisely because individuals and collectivities try to impose their cognitive schemata on one another" (1986, p. 16). In other words, Turner's notion of *communitas* dissipates the moment someone tries to control it. Just as an actor can ruin a scene by trying to control it, the strands of commonality within groups fray once agendas and normed identities are insisted upon.

2 Theatres, Schools, Neo-liberalism and *Communitas*

Niesen echoed Turner's concerns of imposing opinions and outcomes onto a group. In thinking about tensions actualized in Irondale's school programs. Niessen shared that theatre programs were "suddenly there to support the curriculum and to teach content" in ways they were not in the past. He said,

> [Changes in how schools funded arts programs] coupled with the teach to the test stuff just made the work in the schools in the last few years almost impossible – unless you just had a principal who was so with you who also had a coterie of teachers. You had to have that team in place because you didn't have the luxury of two years to see where are those little places that are developing in the school community. But I think being able to move more of our programs into the theatre, that's rejuvenated what we're doing as far as the quality of it.

What Jim articulates in the above interview excerpt is that ritual matters, location matters, but perhaps what matters even more are people showing up with similar aspirations. As Niesen's experience suggests, theatre artists bringing drama into schools became problematic as soon as theatre became solely a midwife to the curriculum.

Terry Greiss said that he always had a "love/hate relationship" with schools. On the one hand schools represented a site where they could work with young people and explore improvisation, theatre, and consensual meaning-making through drama. On the other, schools were a place of exhausted resources, teachers, administrators

and students. "More often than not," Greiss said of schools, "it was like butting your head against the wall."

Changes in funding for arts programs, a reduction in time due to standardized testing demands, limited resources, impositions of curriculum expectations, a lack of buy-in from administration, teachers and students, and work in forgotten and neglected neighborhoods in addition to a new emphasis on hiring certified arts teachers in schools, made working in schools a challenge. Consequently, Irondale began doing less work with its acting company in schools and more in its theatre. For a theatre company that had such a long and successful record of working in schools, it was a telling shift that in the early 2000s, Irondale's relationship with schools became increasingly problematic. This fraught relationship should not be surprising however, as Peck (2015) demonstrates, because the influence of conservative think tanks and other outside political forces increased over urban educational policy. Citing Cersonsky, Peck suggested, "education reform has become synonymous with a 'corporate-backed, market-driven, testing-oriented movement in urban education' (Cersonsky 2013)" (2015, p. 590).

One brief example was school funding. In mid 1990s the New York City Board of Education decided to decentralize the distribution of funds from a centralized central office to principals directly. The idea was to make individual schools more nimble to respond to and create the best programs for individual schools (Hadderman, and ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, E. O 1999). As an Annenberg report demonstrates, this so-called Fair Student Funding Initiative has been met with mixed results. As one principal noted, "The schools had an illusion of discretion, but contracts and staffing obligations left principals debating over what amounted to pennies in the end" (Foley 2010, p. 31). Many arts organizations were caught in the dilemma of what to fund with limited funds.

Theatre education professor O'Connor (2015) draws from Nussbaum's (2010) defense of liberal arts education to contextualize the impact of a neo-liberal educational reform agenda on the arts in schools. He stated,

> Alongside this highly functional and imagination-free pedagogy, it is clear that the curriculum content has shifted away from material that focuses on engaging and firing the imagination and instead training the critical faculties toward material that is directly relevant to test preparation. (p. 465)

Irondale Ensemble member Patrena Murray summarized her struggles in finding *communitas* in neo-liberal schools,

> Like I feel as far as the schools are concerned, I definitely feel burned out. And that's because, if you go into this atmosphere – and it's got its own atmosphere, and it's like thick. You know? It's like… the principal's not on board, the teachers are like ehhh, the students have their own… their own agendas… yeah, and if you face that over and over again… it's like… you know? If you're in a car and you're heading somewhere, you have a goal to get there and the car keeps stalling. I mean how many times are you going to put up with that before you say it's time to get a new car?

The combination of standardizing education and narrowing of curricula and pedagogies restricts who teachers and students can be in schools. This not only

forecloses on how teachers can teach in the classroom, but impacts who is served in schools. Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor's (2013) research demonstrates that the neo-liberal overhaul most often targets minoritized students in so-called at-risk areas "who tend to be hypersegregated in schools with more limited budgets, less culturally and linguistically responsive practices, and highly controlled curriculum based on discrete skill development" (p. 247). There is little room for the arts in an age of "discrete skill development" when the skills of interest are STEM skills.

Theatre in schools can represent play, inquiry, imagination, investigation, and ensemble development. These skills can be at odds with a reform movement that requires standardization. Within such a top-down normative reform schema, any sense of *communitas* disappears and, consequently, Irondale had to adjust. For these reasons, Irondale committed to creating opportunities for young people within their own theatre space.

3 Coalitions of Practice: Irondale Moving Toward *Communitas*

Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor (2013) researched how cultural institutions endeavor to meet the needs of young people outside of schools. In order to create programs of value for young artists, organizations must "regularly negotiate cross-cultural tensions, employ new technologies of communication, and teach through immersive pedagogies that result in explicit skill acquisition expressed in a plurality of texts" (p. 247). Irondale, like many arts organizations around the world, employed multi-layered approaches within their own programming to teach theatre skills to students outside of schools.

> **Peter:** So the relationship [with schools and Irondale] is changing and you're finding that with the Young Company and bringing them into the theatre space itself is having an impact?
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> **Jim Niesen:** Yes! Just that because you're not in a room that's really a chemistry room where you can't move the bolted down seats and when the kids come in, just the fact that they're coming in to a… like when you're coming into a school that's kind of their house that they have other associations with, that's a challenge. Here, it's a space to make theatre with young actors. It's a big difference.

Students at the Irondale Center receive the space and time required to become an ensemble. It is the opposite impulse that is a cornerstone of neo-liberal reform efforts which are to make people concerned with their own individual performance rather than the growth and development of the group. Mitchell (2003) discerns this difference through examining a multicultural self versus the strategic cosmopolitan.

> In multicultural education there has been a subtle but intensifying move away from person-centered education for all, or the creation of the tolerant, 'multicultural self' towards a more individuated, mobile and highly tracked skills-based education, or the creation of the 'strategic cosmopolitan'. The 'multicultural self' was one who was able to work with and

> through difference, and conditioned to believe in the positive advantages of diversity in constructing and unifying the nation. The 'strategic cosmopolitan' is, by contrast, motivated not by ideals of national unity in diversity, but by understandings of global competitiveness, and the necessity to strategically adapt as an individual to rapidly shifting personal and national contexts. (p. 388)

Irondale works to create immersive theatre pedagogies where young actors learn together how to work as *multicultural selves*. A principle rule often heard at Irondale 'your partner is a genius'. The focus is not on the individual actor's experience, but on the group's. To see yourself as part of a larger whole directly opposes a 'strategic cosmopolitan' dynamic. As is Spolin's sense that there is no group of individual actors, the goal must be the one artistic group (Spolin 1999, p. 10). To work in that group, actors must be open, vulnerable, present, and giving. As Hatton and Lovesy remind practitioners, playbuilding is comprised of three core practices: making, performing and reflecting (2009, p. 10). None of this happens while focused on self. Immersive theatre pedagogies are not fixed processes, but develop and shift as the youth companies change and grow.

Education researcher Shauna Butterwick interrogates these dynamics of difference and normed identities within groups by noting that the assumptions made about members of a particular group or community create "borders, exclusions, and dichotomies" (2003, p. 451) as is true within strategic cosmopolitan pedagogies. It is these borders that constrain the dynamic shifting and reintegration of groups that Turner sought through his idea of *communitas*. "Part of the difficult work of coalitions" Butterwick notes, "reflects the tension between creating a sense of belonging/community and not suppressing differences" (2003, p. 451). Butterwick draws on the work of Iris Young (1990) to move beyond essentializing notions of difference.

> [Young] calls for coalition practices that reflect a form of democratic cultural pluralism, where difference is about specificity rather than dichotomy. Here the aim is not to voice "principles of unity" but, rather, to allow "each constituency to analyze economic and social issues from the perspective of its experience (1990, p. 188)." (2003, p. 451)

A 17-year-old Young Company member captures the benefits to individuals within the artistic group when she says,

> I go to a performing arts high school but it is nothing like Irondale. I could never find a place like Irondale... it's not like reading a script and learning lines, it's about knowing who you are and expressing yourself without being judged. And that is what theatre is, and I think that when I go to school they don't enforce that. So when I come to Irondale I feel like, like I'm given a chance to be me." Young Company teen ensemble Member speaking at a talkback after their performance of *Casablanca Reflections,* an original teen-devised piece.

This is at the core of Irondale's practice – to *analyze issues from the perspective of one's own experience.* For Irondale, creating *communitas* means using improvisation (based heavily on the work of Viola Spolin) to create a space where actors meet, develop rituals of practice and play with and explore ideas consensually on their feet. This for them is a roadmap to create a coalition of practices that instills a sense of *communitas* and a vision that influences their values and work.

4 Engagement

> **Patrena:** If society knew that you learn a lot while playing… if the world knew that. And somehow it's like, um… and it gets trickled down to the Board of Ed or whatever where it's seeped into the fabric of the institution where it's like in order for you to do something substantial, it has to be serious. This is how we know it's important because it's serious.

Irondale's work emerges from improvisation and devising. The insistence on improvisational principles (for example, accepting the offers of others, creating room for your scene partner, adding new information) requires an artistic and generous space of exchange and intellectual commerce. If the process is devoid of good art, however, process is not enough.

An additional complication to Irondale's work is that it is political and attempts to provoke its audience to think, react, and respond. Consequently, there is always a danger that too many influences dilute their work and muddy a clear point of view. Furthermore, an additional challenge, as applied theatre artist and professor Michael Balfour suggests, is the social engagement aspects of theatre might eclipse the aesthetic value of the work. According to Balfour, the "aesthetic is interdependent with the possibilities of social engagement" (Balfour 2009, p. 356).

As either the political/social nature or the improvisational orientations of Irondale's work could easily overwhelm its artistic merits, it is important to have a strong directorial vision. That is the charge of Irondale's artistic director, Jim Niesen. He summarizes the challenges and ways of working by saying, 'we have to say yes' to each other. This trope of improvisation theory is, of course, an instruction on how to create layered improvisational work, but when adapted as an institutional philosophy, rehearsal has the potential to become dynamic and organic. Niesen continues,

> … and this is such a Spolin thing, but she talks about thoughts and ideas emerging. We shouldn't think things up – especially in the schools where we try to solve things consensually. And that's what we do in rehearsal all the time and it's so easy to apply it to other situations.

Long-time company member Michael-David Gordon describes Irondale's process as,

> like a giant computer where we load all of these things, scene titles, music pieces, places that we've been- so that things will pop up and connect in ways that are intuitive, not intellectual – but intuitive.

While Terry Greiss describes the process this way.

> I guess so much of the way, or the philosophy is… is an absence of how. You don't want to give people your solution to the problem, because you'll just get a repeat of your solution. You want to set the rules, the focus and the evaluative criteria so they'll discover their own solution to the problem. That's the breakthrough moment of acting.

In his interview with Leese Walker, a former Irondale Ensemble member and now the founding artistic director of a professional theatre company call Strike

Anywhere Performance Ensemble, Terry asked whether she notices any traces from her time with Irondale in her work with her own theatre company.

> **Leese:** Well um, it's been so much apart of my life, it's hard to imagine actually not having had that so it's in some ways almost hard for me to answer but I know that it has deeply affected my own practice in the rehearsing room, how I structure rehearsals, because I've had so much time to learn experimenting in the classroom. In terms of how to structure a series of games, that they would work in the most efficient way. What various games and exercises are good for. I feel like I'm constantly improvising in the classroom and the role of the teaching artist and the way that I approach being a director in the rehearsal room; it is so similar. I feel like my role in both forums is as a facilitator, I don't really function like a traditional director. I really set experiments in motion and allow the participants to find the answer. I guide, I shape, I suggest but I try not to impose.

In the interview Terry picks up on Leese's idea about not imposing and setting experiments in motion. "You're able to do that because you listen to the students. There's a big difference between hearing and listening." Hearing is acknowledging that another has spoken. Listening is keeping open the possibility of being changed by what was said. As Freire suggested, "The [cultural] invader thinks, at most, about the invaded, never with them; the latter have their thinking done for them by the former" (Freire 1986, p. 102). Listening has a dimension of reciprocity and exchange. Listening is curiosity in others and asking what they are interested in knowing and learning.

Terry tells a story about working in one school where the entire session was absolute bedlam and an irate principal was trying to get an explanation from the teaching artists about why they would allow the students to behave the way they did. Terry was trying to explain that theatre teaches students how to think and it was clear that the students were unaccustomed to being asked to think. The principal erupted with, "I don't have time to teach them how to think. I have to teach them how to read!" Any good drama process, Irondale's included, is decentralized, intuitive, incremental, improvisational, and focused on the group. This is a way to think, despite the principal's protests. This process is a counter-narrative to neo-liberal dispositions that focus "upon individual rights and the increasingly authoritarian use of […] power to sustain the system" (Harvey 2007, p. 42). As theatre education scholar Jonothan Neelands wrote, it is the act of "being in drama together which was contributing to change, rather than a particular lesson or production" (2009, p. 181). It is about work over time, not an individual day's work.

5 Neo-liberalism and Liveness in Education

> *Live performance places us in the living presence of the performers, other human beings with whom we desire unity and can imagine achieving it, because they are there, in front of us. Yet live performance also inevitably frustrates that desire since its very occurrence presupposes a gap between performer and spectator. […] live performance inevitably yields a sense of the failure to achieve community between the audience and the performer.* (Auslander 1999, p. 57)

Auslander's understanding of liveness in performance is as true for theatre as it is for education. Theatre artists search for the illusive alive moment in performance like prospectors pan for gold. As Bundy et al. (2012) demonstrate, audience engagement during the performance may influence feelings of dissatisfaction and discomfort. Teachers try to bring content *to life* and to make material relevant. Terry noted that during the first few years of the company's existence, the search for *liveness* was a shared concern between Irondale and schools.

> **Terry:** We were trying to trap it [aliveness] onstage and the New York City Board of Education -or at least a few visionary educators – were trying to inject it into classrooms for students who saw school as a place of consistent failure. Our missions and methods, if not always in sync, were at least compatible. As we've always known, the most important thing in theatre is aliveness.
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> **Peter:** What does that mean to you?
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> **Terry:** I go back to Spolin again. She says what we think of as talent is our willingness to directly confront our own experience. And if you think about it, that's a very deep thought, I think. What does it mean to be able to confront your experience? You have to be completely vulnerable and open to it. You have to be so present. You have to take what's happened to you and you have to use that on stage, digest and face it and then confront it in front of others. And we're not just talking about tragic or extreme experiences, we're talking about any experience… the experience of really opening a door on stage, for example. We know when it's fake. We know when someone is reciting lines; we know when someone is having a real thought on stage. When someone's not being physical, when they're acting from the neck up. So it's that sense of the whole body is committed. It's the whole thought process that's happening in the present. It's being rediscovered, it's not frozen and repeated. It's not a piece of film – you only have to do it right once. Many times in the theatre, we settle for what is, as opposed to what's alive!

Terry's desire to create alive spaces with young actors is not exclusive to theatre artists. Teachers also want pedagogies that are innovative and engaging that challenge young people and teachers to learn through doing and enacting. For many teachers in many schools, such practices have been shuttered by district and state education policies. Smith and Kovacs (2011) surveyed one American school district with approximately 1000 teachers on the impacts of President Bush's reform policy called *No Child Left Behind*. The survey found that the implementation of this policy negatively impacted teacher recruitment and retention of experienced teachers. Teachers noted much less job satisfaction and their sense of value and worth as teachers plummeted. Moreover, their autonomy in the classroom to meet individual student's needs has evaporated. One teacher commented in the survey,

> I wish we could develop a system that recognizes monumental improvements made by students. I feel like we set them up to fail. How many times do I have to tell a child 'You tried real hard [sic], but you didn't benchmark!' What about the achievements made by students and teachers every day that can't be measured by test scores or words per minute? Why is everyone so happy to place that label on these kids who can't perform in a one-size-fits-all frame? Some kids have home lives that require more survival skills than reading skills! For those kids, education is not at the top of the list. (Smith and Kovacs 2011 p. 216)

Teachers are the ones who feel the changes most and that reality impacts theatre companies looking to work in their school. Smith and Kovacs' (2011) survey also

indicated that nearly half of the 488 teachers who responded to the survey reported that there was now little to no time left in the school day for the arts.

This is an important backdrop to remember. Smith and Kovacs (2011) cite a study conducted by the Center for Educational Policy showing that 71% of the nation's 15,000 school districts took instructional time from other subjects to increase time for math and reading. It is not only arts organizations that are getting elbowed out in the process – non-STEM teachers (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) are as well.

An important ingredient to aliveness is time. It is cultivated and nurtured and grown through relationship. As Jim Niessen noted, Irondale no longer had the luxury of spending 2 years in a school to find those areas of mutual interest and overlap. True, Auslander (1999) and Bundy et al. (2012) showed that liveness can breed disappointment because of the gap between the performer and the audience is too great (like that between teacher and student). Additionally, research shows this gap exists due to the audience member's experience during the production. But what about the unspoken disappointments when such opportunities are removed from schools entirely? And if they still exist, how can partnerships between schools and theatres seek to create moments of aliveness in a 45 min block once a week?

Like so many theatre companies across the US, Irondale struggles to sustain partnerships with schools. Because of this, they were forced to decide either to adapt their programming and bend to the neoliberal agenda, or find other ways of working with students and create other places where aliveness can happen. Terry lamented this shift and a lack of interest in what Irondale does best in schools.

> What we really teach when we work in schools or with community groups, is *ensemble*, because isn't that necessarily the desired outcome for any community? Aren't those words similar in their intent? How can we come together as a group of individuals to solve problems? How can we develop the "group mind"? It is such an essential component of our process and it's a generous way of working together. We are smarter, more effective together because of what the other ones know. And schools don't seem that interested in that.

6 So What Does This All Mean for Irondale?

Two events coincided in 2008: the significant impacts of the economic downturn and Irondale moving into its permanent home. While Irondale had more programming flexibility due to having its own performance space, the devastating economic collapse of 2007/2008 impinged upon Irondale's capacity to operate its programs intentionally and sustainably. In response to this unforeseen and severe economic reality, Irondale's impulse was not to cut programming or employees, but to open their doors to as many artists and organizations with sympathetic missions and programming styles. Irondale had to work within its very limited resources, and the one asset that has always remained invaluable was the permanent ensemble. One of the innovations that grew out of this time was the development of Irondale's Young Company. This

commitment to company enabled Irondale to now bring students to its space, for now they had both people and space. This was a major shift in the group's previous school engagement programs and the move to bringing young people to the Irondale Center became a highly valuable artistic arm of the ensemble.

Moving out of the classroom has led Irondale to some new realizations. When Irondale went into schools, no matter how unorthodox the program, how innovative the teaching the artists were still seen by students (and teachers too) as agents of the Board of Education. Students were working in classrooms, gymnasium, auditoriums or multi-purpose rooms that were not designed for theatrical play. In fact, for many, these were the same rooms in which students were praised for behavior that was antithetical to such work. There were few spaces within schools that could be reimagined as artistic playgrounds. Consequently, it was a consistent challenge to break through the "thickness" (as Patrena noted), of the institution's culture. But bring the student to the theater itself and no such baggage comes with them. They walk into the theatre and they are actors or students of acting, not students who are being forced to act. Work together proceeds at a faster pace and, in fact, it seems as if every hour spent in workshop at the theatre is equivalent to 5 40-min workshops in a classroom. The students immediately feel like they are professionals because everything around them signifies professionalism. "If I'm here, I guess I belong here."

It has been argued that in moving out of schools Irondale is working only with self-selected students and therefore misses the opportunity to find students and offer opportunities to some who might really need the experience. Irondale doesn't dispute this, and for that reason, Terry says the company will never completely abandon its work in schools. The actors in the Irondale Ensemble, he continues, are not missionaries, they are artists, seeking to discover what makes great theatre. Working with youth is a strategy in reaching that objective. Bringing the work to non-actors must be held to as high a standard as any rehearsal or training program they engage in with professionals. For the artists at Irondale the only way that theatre can do good is by being good. Anything else is a compromise.

There are no signs that corporate America's neo-liberal agenda will dissipate any time soon. If anything, the influence is growing stronger. This raises real questions for arts organization about how to stay true to their mission and values while continuing to work in an ever limit school system? How can meaningful partnerships be forged when time and commitments are being invested in the perpetuation of high-stakes testing regimes? Where are the places where students can work as artists first and are not only using art in service of the curriculum? Where are the places for students to use their own voice for their own purposes?

These are challenging questions in challenging times. While Irondale's journey is not a perfect one, they continue to negotiate the shifting foundations of educational programming with sincere interest and innovation. In a time of such transformation, are there things that will not change for Irondale? Yes, their core belief in creating young artists who exist as multicultural selves, a belief in ensemble, in play and in the benefits for both professional and young actors who work with and learn from each other. This way of working will not topple the neo-liberal structures dominating education's landscape; but it cracks them a bit.

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