

BREAD & WATER

By Dorothy Garcia and Tom Harding

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As America struggles with issues of social justice and freedom of expression, it has never been more important to provide young people in our schools and communities with diverse opportunities for self-expression. Teachers and community workers are responsible for instilling in children the sense of being powerful citizens and active participants in their communities. We offer our ongoing relationship with a group of young people in Durban, South Africa as an example of the power of the arts to support individual growth within a context of community involvement.

The SETS Project: Rights and Responsibilities

It's 1999, midsummer in Durban, South Africa. Even the walls of the Mayfield Theater rehearsal room seem to drip with perspiration. We are gathered to do work on SETS, or Self-Empowerment Theater Scheme, a two month project funded by government and corporate support. The theme, "Rights and Responsibilities," is designed to get young participants to grapple with the responsibility of freedom in a fledgling democracy. It must be a process of discovery – these are deep, lifelong questions, powerful ideas that will guide them and their generation.

We are co-leading the project with Ellis & Bheki, a biracial acting duo whose groundbreaking work in "Theater of Imagination" has received international acclaim. After seeing their phenomenal performance at a conference in San Diego in 1998, we

established a correspondence, they received a grant and invited us to join them, and here we are. We've come to provide our input during the four week developmental phase. Ellis & Bheki pour tremendous energy into their playmaking and, ever since their initial collaboration during Apartheid, have struggled to fuse European (Ellis) and African (Bheki) theater styles within an artistic context characterized by segregation.

During the days prior to our arrival, Ellis & Bheki introduce the five fledgling actors to breathing exercises, teamwork activities, and theater games. Now it's time to begin creating an original theater piece, and we need a catalyst for ideas. Dorothy offers to lead a persona doll workshop the following morning to allow the actors to generate their own characters. The group accepts.

Making persona dolls is a simple activity that often generates profound results.

The idea is to build a doll, a character with its own story. It must be made by hand, from scratch. The doll maker collects objects that attract his/her attention, whatever can be found – bits of nature, discarded items, anything that is free to be taken. The character will reveal how it should be assembled. Finally, the doll must be given a name, and a story that includes the who, what, when, where, and why of its life.

The hunt begins. The actors have an hour to search the grounds of the theater, which are rich with material...and these are people who know poverty. Poor folks are experts at making something from nothing. Everything is fair game. Sticks, leaves, discarded food containers, broomsticks...best of all, there's a dumpster behind the theater's set design studio. Figures quickly take shape, and soon the doll makers are ready to introduce their characters.

The creations are multifaceted, and reveal the complex viewpoints of their authors. They make perfect skeletons for the characters in the play. Below we share one of the stories that struck us on many levels – the struggle with colonialism, the seductiveness of American culture, the search for identity. In light of current world events, the tale was an eerie foreshadowing of things that have come to pass.

The Doll Story

by Armstrong Mbuyazi (1999)

His name is Saddam Hussein. He was recently at the United States, where he attended a congress. In this congress the chairperson was the state president.

In this meeting certain issues were discussed involving the United States and Iraq, and one of these issues was Iraq's everlasting oil which kept the U.S. president panting. As usual, the U.S. wanted to buy it from Saddam and refine it and sell it back to Iraq, but no, Saddam was too smart for that. He claimed that he can refine it all much better than the U.S. only by using his. But as I was listening and writing on my notebook, one thing came to my attention. Saddam was not worried about his oil, but mostly about American clothes which are exported to Iraq by the U.S. "I don't want those funky outfits that the U.S. is imposing on my country. I like my own," Mr. Hussein complained. He also said that it was "kinda groovy," and not only did he complain about clothes but also American music. He complained that his cousin "Saita Hussein's music is not sold any more and they can't afford to have Saturday parties and meet the girls."

What I noticed in this meeting is that Saddam is a very funky man and he would die to keep the groove. And he knows what is good for him and his family. He is also a

very threatening man. His last threat was to America to the U.S. President. Saddam told the President that if he tries to attack he will tell the whole world about his Saturday night visit to the party in Iraq and his boogie down with the girls. The U.S. President has had enough about his private life being discussed in public. Sure, he wouldn't like the world to know that he has been sneaking across the world to meet the girls at Iraq.

Even though Saddam suggested that American music should not be imported to Iraq, it is said that he enjoys lots of rap and hip-hop music, which he plays very loud in his convertible 2-door Ferrari. And he has often been seen wearing Levi Strauss 501 jeans and big Nike shoes which are American made. It has been noticed that when he speaks he uses lots of American slang such as "Know what I'm sayin'?" and "Check these moves out, my man." He is thinking of moving to America next month. "I think that America is quite a funky country," he said. Every time Saddam attends the conference he leaves everybody confused, including himself.



Armstrong and Saddam

The doll making experience opens the doors to character development and encourages the actors to become more active participants in the development of the storyline. How do we know? The cows tell us so. That's right. There are cows in the play, and several actors will be acting as cows during a scene. The young people have been instructed about how to play a cow, but Armstrong seems unconvinced. Dorothy asks him what's up. Armstrong shares with us that he lived on a farm during his youth, with plenty of time to watch the cows (like so many black South Africans, he lived in a rural area, separated from his mother, who worked with a white family in the city). He offers his interpretation of the movement and sounds of cows. Who would have thought that a "moo" could be groundbreaking? The choreography and sound effects are adjusted to incorporate Armstrong's suggestions.

For revolutionary exchanges to occur among teachers, artists and students, real life must be allowed to interfere. As with Armstrong's experience of cows, art is as much about reality as dream, especially in the realm of relational learning. During lunch break on the first days of our residency, we observe a pattern; the two individuals with cars leave to buy their lunches, and those without wheels walk to the convenience store to share a giant bag of chips and a liter of soda. We're uncomfortable with the separateness, and with the lack of adequate nourishment for all. There's no communion, and we return with fuller bellies, but no new knowledge of each other's lives.

The South African rand is 8-1 to the US dollar, so we exercise our economic privilege; the next day we bring a whole chicken, a loaf of bread, some sandwich fixings and fruit. For \$15, it's enough to feed the entire group. We invite the cast to lunch, and amazing things happen. Cast members begin talking about their lives, their families. We introduce the idea of the potluck, which immediately catches on. The lunches become an anticipated

daily ritual, with cast members contributing pieces of fruit, a bag of chips, whatever they can from their weekly stipend of about \$30, spent mostly on public transit. We discuss the issues of the day. Elections are upcoming – is everyone planning to vote for the first time, and do they understand how important that is? Since “the change” in 1994, the new South African government has been using television spots to inform the public, and especially youth, about AIDS. In conjunction with Valentine’s Day, government TV stations run an ad campaign promoting condom use. When February 14 arrives, we seize the moment, bringing valentines, chocolate and condoms for the cast. At lunch, we raise the subject of AIDS. One individual expresses doubt about the seriousness of the disease – he doesn’t know anyone affected by HIV! Immediately stories of afflicted friends and family flow forth. Yes, this is real. The lunches lay the groundwork for the deepest work in the play and beyond, forging an essential connection between art and life.

To provide formal opportunities for cast members to exercise voice and listen to others, we introduce the idea of “the circle” at the opening and closing of each rehearsal. Circles are used throughout Africa to shape community gatherings, dances and rituals, creating an environment in which each person is equidistant from the center, equally involved in the activity. Cast members take turns sharing impressions of what has happened, what’s working well, what the challenges are. At first, this poses a challenge for both the voiceless and those used to being heard – the actors don’t know what to do with the opportunity to speak their minds, and our co-leaders are unfamiliar with sharing it. But with practice, communication is given and received more openly and fluidly.

Like water. As Americans, passing water around feels natural in the melting heat. But when Tom hands the bottle to Armstrong, the latter hesitates for a moment. Tom is

aware of the subtle interruption, but since another cast member is in the midst of sharing, it passes without discussion. Later in the week, Tom approaches Armstrong, who reveals that this was the first time he had ever been offered by a white man to drink from the same bottle. And so it is that breaking bread and sharing water, the most basic communal acts, become revolutionary acts that change lives.

Social justice and the arts must involve the building of relationships. By the conclusion of the SETS project, the five young participants have gone through the process of making inward discoveries, and moving outside of themselves to connect with their communities. The premiere of the play is covered by SABC 1, a national network, and attended by the mayor of Durban. For the month following, the ensemble performs at township schools throughout the area. In their growth as actors, they are becoming self-directed, developing a sense of the impact that they can have in their life roles – as artists, as performers in the community, as participants in a democracy.

Art Attack: Postering for Peace

In January, 2003, we return to South Africa for the third time in four years. South Africa has possessed us, and we are organizing several projects for the coming year and developing a business-supporting-the-arts, a bed & breakfast called Blue On Blue. Before we leave the U.S., we contact guerrilla artist Robbie Conal, who supplies us with a bundle of his most recent posters, a triptych that we will use for what he calls an “Art Attack.” For years Conal has been pasting up posters in American cities, using electrical switchboxes and bill-postered walls (never on private property or anything that will be damaged) as his spaces for public exhibition. We want to take the show overseas.



Posters by Robbie Conal

We organize a reunion with three of the actors from the SETS project, Armstrong Mbuyazi, Sandi Ncwane and William Fisher, who travel from Durban, more than a hundred miles away. For a weekend we'll catch up with each other and plan for future collaborations. They are the bed & breakfast's first guests. We can see how they've changed and grown. Armstrong is doing paralegal work at a law firm and William teaches preschool and is preparing to open an internet café. Sandi works at a grocery store, and has come to Cape Town to buy her first pair of pants. Radical changes in just four years. They are moving forward, along with their country, at light speed. William is the only one still engaged in the artwork that he loves, choreographing an annual dance for his church. Promising opportunities for performing artists of color in South Africa are next to nil, but all three remain committed to the art as a vehicle for expression and social change. They enthusiastically join us on our postering mission.

At about midnight, we pile into the rented Subaru. Our first stop is the Saint James Train station, home to a large red electrical switchbox. Though tired, we work well with one another – the ties we developed during those sweltering weeks of the SETS project

remain strong. Dorothy rides in the cramped cargo space, slathering posters with wallpapering glue. Tom drives. Armstrong, William and Sandi leap forth to attach and smooth the posters into place. Within thirty seconds, MLK, Jr. and Ghandi reside at the station, watching over the Main Road.

We continue along the coast to Muizenberg, and stop to poster some highly visible electrical boxes along Beach Drive. As William applies an image of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, to a bright blue box, there is another flash of blue...it's a vehicle... the police!

The police car slows to a stop. Sandi freezes solid, imagining the phone call she will have to make from the police station to her father in Durban, but then remembers why she's there – a poster of the Dalai Lama is secured to the blue switchbox.

The officer looks carefully at the participants, then the posters. Dorothy hangs out of the open hatch just in time to see a tall white man step from the driver's seat. Tom. He acknowledges the officer, as if an acquaintance. Momentarily perplexed, the officer hesitates, smiles uncertainly at the motley crew and its handiwork, then drives on. Dorothy waves. We are speechless, and then as if simultaneously deflating, we let out a collective gasp. We're sweaty, scented in the ancient dew of terror, and feeling like we've experienced enough for one evening.

The next day, we observe a couple strolling in front of the Saint James Train Station. One points to the image of Dr. MLK, Jr. as they approach the red box. She repeats the gesture as she notices Ghandi on the other side. Success!

The posters speak to what is needed to guide the future of South Africa. For all of us, it has been an unforgettable experience, and a natural extension of our work four years earlier in Durban. Art is at the heart of democracy and social justice in its capacity to provide a vehicle for the development of authentic voice, and carries tremendous power for change when it emerges from shared relationships. Like bread and water, it has the capacity to provide the most fundamental stuff of life, to feed us and make us grow.

(Links: View a documentation panel of *Art Attack: Postering for Peace* at www.ArtAidsArt.org.

See Robbie Conal's poster art at www.robbyconal.com.)