

In both my artistry and my teaching I strive to have an eye towards inclusion. As an artist, I am drawn to stories and cultures that don't garner their fair share in the spotlight, with a specific interest in exploring plays that feature differently-abled or minority characters. This passion grew out of a personal struggle to find ways to be an ally to communities that I am not necessarily a part of, but that I seek to support.

During my undergraduate career, I was asked to direct a play for the university's Asian American performance ensemble. The play, *Eye of the Coconut* by Jeannie Barroga, explored the cultural and intergenerational clashes experienced by the Filipino community transitioning into American culture. At first, I was intimidated to take on a play that dealt with issues like cultural assimilation and ethnic identity. As a non-Filipino, how do I authentically portray the Filipino perspective? Are other races even capable of directing plays steeped in diverse cultural nuance? With no satisfactory answer, I jumped head first into rehearsal only to find my feelings of trepidation quickly melt away. They were instead supplanted by a responsibility to my cast and to local Pacific American community groups to celebrate this culture's heritage, and educate our audience about its unique traditions. The production grew into a community building experience; members of the community consulted on the show's language and customs, and at times student actors directed me, especially as they discussed the impact of their minority status and the lack of cultural visibility. I realized in these moments that by opening a dialogue about underrepresentation in and through the arts, I was simultaneously aligning myself as a community ally and beginning to develop my own artistic voice.

Since *Eye of the Coconut*, that feeling of responsibility has never quite left me. I have grown more interested in the arts' potential to reverse stereotypes and incite social change, now with greater focus on the "disabled experience". As theatre enters a new wave of diversity onstage disability is falling short of garnering the same representation that the other facets of diversity have received. My goal as an artist and an ally is to raise the ceiling of expectation for people with disabilities and help shed light on a culture whose abilities are often stigmatized and limited by a label. In effect, I direct with three "E's" in mind: engage, entertain, and educate. I endeavor to create thought-provoking theatre where the element of "disability" does not lessen or cheapen the quality of the piece. On the contrary, I hope to start a discussion with audiences and actors alike about disability stereotypes, perceived dependence, and person-first rhetoric.

In this sense my identities as an artist and educator are often blurred. The way I approach inclusion in the classroom is twofold: inclusion within my student population and inclusion within my curriculum. When it comes to my students, I seek to build a classroom climate that is both supportive and judgment-free. I work hard to ensure that I create the least restrictive environment possible in order for them to succeed. As a teaching artist, I rely heavily on theatre's diverse learning modalities to customize my lessons to a spectrum of skills, intelligences, and interests. When it comes to my curriculum, I tend to gravitate towards subject matter that includes dynamic cultures and historical events that speak to the ethnic and racial diaspora present in the classroom. It is my responsibility as an arts educator to help students not only build an appreciation of their heritage, but also recognize the commonalities and diversities across cultures and history. In doing so I aim to develop student empathy and understanding while preparing students for a lifetime of interactions with diverse partners.

Now more than ever students need arts education to help bolster pride in creative thought and provide

varying perspectives. While arts education has the inherent accessibility to reach a variety of learners, often overlooked is its ability to cultivate intellectual and social learning within schools and communities. Theatre has an illuminating quality that takes knowledge off of the page and allows students of all ages to actively experience the joy of learning. Not only do the arts allow students to have an authentic experience with a core content area, they can also elucidate and actualize more abstract literary and mathematical concepts. Arts Education provides students with an incredible outlet for emotional expression while fostering empowerment and creativity that will serve them well beyond their artistic endeavors. As students engage in the collaborative art-making process they will exercise creative thinking, communication, confidence, and problem solving, all while developing a better understanding of themselves and the world around them.

It is an exciting time to enter into the field of arts education because of its potential to populate our field with the next generation of great artists, while simultaneously developing the next generation of great citizens. In looking towards the future, I want to be a part of a culture that values innovation, perseverance, creativity, and compromise. A career in theatre education is an investment in the young creative minds that will grow to enrich our communities and shape our world. To this end, I strive to facilitate a safe space for this creative growth where students can trust that their artistic and personal choices are heard and valued.

As a longtime lover of and participant in the arts, my experiences have fostered social tolerance and a strong, intrinsic motivation. Seeing the ramifications that the arts have had on my own education only deepens my drive to support the arts in and out of the classroom. In advocating for arts education, I tend to modify Annie Oakley's adage, "Anything you can teach, I can teach *through the arts*". Although not nearly as catchy as the Irving Berlin lyric, I advocate by example and hold firm to the belief that the arts are a helpful point of entry in any setting. I advocate by creating a classroom culture that uses a holistic look into the theatre-making process to give students a platform to express themselves. Outside of the classroom, I hope to continue creating and collaborating on programming that gives communities an accessible way into the arts, whether through outreach programming, student matinees, access materials, or relaxed performances. As a teacher, artist, and advocate, I must be the change I want to see.