

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY

### HEARING THEIR VOICES

student-actors at the immigrant learning center bring their stories to life

I'm in the control room of MATV during a rehearsal for the video shoot of "Bring Them Back!" a production of the Immigrant Learning Center's ESL Theater Class. Mireille's character, a Haitian woman, is trying to deliver her papers in a heavy snowstorm, when she runs over a customer's garden. She is unprepared for the next storm, though: the customer's invective hurled at her across the pile of snow. Anguished and confused, she cries out, "Deported! Did she say deported! What did she mean?"

One by one, fellow immigrants, witnesses from a bus stop, come up to console her. They make up euphemistic paraphrases of the customer's insults about her driving, her character, her right to even stay in the US. But the hurt overpowers her, and she gets to the heart of the painful moment. "I can't see any garden. I can't see any sidewalk. I only see snow!" Something cold and stinging that she's not used to.

As I watch Fatima, the producer, set up the shots, Jean - one of the actors who consoled Mireille - tells me that when the newspaper customer hurts her, "she hurts all of us, because we are all immigrants."

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The ESL Theater Class at the Immigrant Learning Center is doing something very exciting - as a self-sufficient video crew, they are filming vignettes based on their own experiences, strengthening acting, technical, leadership, and English skills simultaneously. Directed by Kathleen Klose, the group's other agenda is to dramatize its stories in order to educate and sensitize the public about the immigrant experience.

A not-for-profit learning center offering free English classes for adult immigrants and refugees, the ILC's mission is to equip its students with sufficient English to succeed in their new lives on all levels. It also constantly reinforces a positive message about immigrants' contributions to our country economically, socially, and culturally.

It was founded in 1992, and under the leadership of Director Diane Portnoy, has grown exponentially since its beginnings as a three-room facility.

The theater class has performed periodically since October, 2004, when it was part of a workshop facilitated by Klose on *Using ESOL Theater to Teach ESOL* at the Massachusetts Coalition of Adult Educators Network Conference in Fitchburg. The class began in September, 2004 as an evolution of the Immigrant Theater Group, which had been formed more than a year earlier in May 2003. The ILG's sessions culminated in the writing, rehearsal and performance of "If You Could Hear My Voice" at the Malden Public Library in August of that year. A month after the performance of these eight vignettes about contemporary immigrant life, Kathy Smith, ILC Director of Development and a veteran of an MATV studio production class, approached the TV station about doing a video of the play.

In February, 2004, the finished video was shown eight times. It has aired in Public Access TV stations nationally, in Kansas, New York, Connecticut, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Missouri, Michigan, North Dakota, Minnesota and Ohio.

Each vignette in the first production, "If You Could Hear My Voice" is based on a true story. Kathleen Klose, who scripted, co-produced, co-edited and staged the play, has treated its thematic dichotomies with skill and sensitivity. Prejudice and denigration of the other are supplanted by respect for the familiar. Personal isolation finds solace in group support. The pain of separation is tempered by the comforting hope of a better future. These vignettes also celebrate life's little victories, like finally mastering foreign pronunciation. Anyone who has successfully rolled their first Spanish "r" knows what I mean.

With the versatile use of simple props and culturally appropriate background music, Klose created viable scenes for the stories. The same blonde-wood/paper screen set up a house in Haiti, an apartment in the Middle East, a partitioned doctor's waiting area. A line of bright orange folding chairs became a row of seats on the Orange Line. Klose's strongest resource, though, is her cast. The viewer feels the emotional reality from actors who "lived" the parts they play.

These vignettes are quick takes on harsh realities that Klose honored with good dialogue and the insights of her students. Those who choose to leave their countries counsel the ones staying behind to tell their children the best kind of lie – one that will become the truth when they're reunited. Split-screen conversations reinforce the distance separating a lonely wife begging her husband to come home. "And do what?" he says. "What kind of a husband do you want? One with no job?" Then there's "Wad Time Easy Please" and "Building Bridges," where anglocentric falta de respecto of K-Mart employees evolves into sensitivity and decency, but not without some Latin sparks flying from a Colombian co-worker.

In a late-night ride home on the Orange line after cleaning offices and bathrooms, two immigrant women defend themselves against American-style intolerance for people who dress differently ("Why don't you take off that scarf? This is not Afghanistan.") and speak differently ("Don't touch my baby! In this country we don't touch other people's babies!").

Students in Klose's class have many theories about this type of prejudice. Some people "think that because you have an inferior job, you have an inferior status," Rosemeire, a savvy woman with great joie de vivre and former owner of an auto service center in her native Brazil, told me. Students aren't unaware that Americans find them an economic threat.

When Hongmei and De Jian, a former teacher and a retired physician, respectively, both chimed, "Bus!" I learned how a misunderstanding of cultural differences can fuel a whole chain of misconceptions and antagonisms. In China it's expected, and intelligent, to cram to the front of a bus waiting line. Here in the US, it's rude.

In general, immigrants trigger a fear of the other – simple as that is, it's pretty powerful. "They're just different," Rita's daughter Olena, observed. They personify change, a fearful disruption to the status quo.

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Actor-students became MATV crew members this March with a special studio production class for Klose's ESL Theater Class taught by MATV Executive Director Jeff Hansell and Manager of Technical Operations Terlonzo Amos. Now, peer mentors who are certified in studio production help new students learn the ropes – or cameras. This summer, they are filming "Bring Them Back!" about the contributions, and difficulties, of the immigrant labor force.

In the studio class, relationships are built around the project; they are not artificial. In order to get a rehearsal happening, a stage properly set, everybody has to speak English. When there's a lull in activity, cast members lay out the props. If men aren't there to center a platform, the women do it. The decision-making on stage direction problems is collective but respectful of Klose's leading role as director. At one point, the crew member's solution to a lighting problem prevailed.

Students really have fun in class. Fatima told me that she now finds herself mentally restaging scenes she sees on TV, although she has no plans to use the skills she's learned. Other students are excited by the extra skill set. "It gives me the opportunity to manage the equipment inside. It helps you for a future job," Rosie feels.

This class means far more than studio production to these students. Acting, preparing and rehearsing lines, speaking with volume and energy in front of an audience – in a foreign language – are like marathon training for power walks. The result is significant. Speaking with three to four people used to increase her heart rate, Rosie remembers. "Now, it's normal." Rita says she observed an overall change in students' body language as they worked with their acting teacher Judy Muss'ells on acting, breathing and speaking exercises.

Muss'ells works with students every Thursday. As mentor, she has had enormous impact. "I remember before we went on stage, one time," Rita noted. Judy said, "You are all special because you are immigrants. Show the audience." I never forgot that."

In acting class, student improvisations mimic the instantaneous give-and-take of real life conversation. It's valuable. "Every day, we have to go to the child's school, or shopping. The improvisation builds confidence," Edwije told me. Confidence and vocabulary, not just to interact, but to help other immigrants deal with an English-speaking society where language is the key to claiming one's rights and advancing.

When Kathleen Klose began this program, she had students read stories from the anthology "The Heat," written by former American steel workers after a workshop with poet Jimmy Santiago Baca. She wanted them to identify with American laborers. It was an unconsciously important introduction to the theater class that she may not have realized. Reading the short stories, students saw average people finding their creative voice, gaining confidence, and growing through the process. Klose's students are now writing and directing their own scenes. Like the story

writers in “The Heat,” Rosie in the theater class, said, “writing your own plays...you know your soul.”

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