

Playwright's Notebook

The Play: *Nothing To Lose*

Subject: teen violence and society's response.

Began: February 2010 as part of my grade 11 drama class.

Topical Events: the murder (2008) and trial (2010) of Jordan Manners, who was shot in a Toronto High School. The stabbing of Mike Macdonald outside an Oshawa High School, March 2010.

First workshop production: April 22, 2010, the Canadian Independent School Drama Festival. A 22 minute section of what will eventually be up to an hour in length.

Narrators: Life and Death orchestrate the action and then comment.

The range of voices: the killer, the victim, friends and peers of both, families of both, politicians, cops, teachers, media, the general public.

The Title: *Nothing To Lose* refers to two ideas at the same time. Connected to the killer, it reveals a careless and ignorant attitude that leads to tragedy. Connected to the society at large, it reveals a brave and accepting attitude of trying our best to solve such problems.

Choice Comments: following is a selection of comments from students who saw the first workshop production. They are grade 7's and 8's for the most as the older students just talked to me. Their sentiments were pretty similar to the younger students.

Most students were puzzled by the ending. I had to tell them that I was too. I had to stick something on the end because I hadn't finished the play and the opening was right around the corner.

Many too had specific reactions to the costumes of Life and Death and gave specific ways to make Death more death-like. Many liked the theatrical elements. All seemed to get the point.

"I really liked the play and how it showed all sides of the argument. I also liked the message that it seemed to show how sick our society is."

"I liked the concept of Life and Death arguing over things. I also learned what to do if I was in one of those situations, which can be important."

"I like the message that was conveyed through the play and I agree that people should not discriminate against other people who are not like them or those who have a different culture and heritage."

"The idea of whether putting the boy in jail helps society or really creates more problems is not solved, but is a very interesting and thought-provoking topic. Great production!"

"I particularly liked the scene where Frank was being tried in court. It seemed like he was being cornered just like the boy he killed and it had a great dramatic effect."

"I loved how death and life would stop the picture and talk about what just happened, I thought that was really cool."

"I especially liked the characters of Life and Death; I thought they added a lot to the play and gave a different perspective on the conflict of teen violence...I also like how the play incorporated humour. Although it was about a very serious topic, it gave light to the play to contradict the somber topic."

"I think this is one of the biggest issues our society faces every day. Do we put him in jail or do we keep him out of jail? I think what we have to do is put him in a halfway house. A halfway house is where most people go when they are recovering from being in jail for a long time, but I think it is a perfect place for a minor who commits murder. It still shows some discipline and doesn't completely resemble normal life, but it helps them stay on the right path because there they will be with the right people."

"I really liked how the plot and themes of the play were relatable to a teen issue in Toronto, a topic that should be close to all of us. The characters of Life and Death gave perspective into a different side of crime, one which we don't see on the news. Touching on the topics of the criminal's parents, the benefits/ drawbacks of prison, and the roles of bystanders gave the audience a lot to think about and mull over."

"I really liked this play, because it talked a lot about peer pressure, and doing the right/wrong thing. If you do the wrong thing, then you will have to face the consequences, of going to jail. I find it sad that so many bad things are happening in our community, and that some people don't learn the first time they do something. Some people get into fights because they were at a party, either drinking to much or something else like that. This play really explained everything and it was both very serious and funny (at some parts)."

"I really enjoyed the play today. It was amazing. The emotion and seriousness portrayed in the issue, really made me see how teen violence is an issue. Since I have never been exposed to teen violence, it was scary to see how this can result. The play was very well done, and the roles were played extremely well. I thought it was going to be another cheesy play, where no emotion or message is actually shown. But this was defiantly not the case!"

"The acting was very strong, especially the victim, Death and Life. i felt very touched by the play and almost cried during the play around the middle. The message was very strong at the middle of the play. In addition I felt the way you used humour (the cop) was very good and like in a Shakespeare tragedy brighten, even only for a minute, the darkest play."

"I liked how the play *Nothing to Lose* had Death and Life give their opinions on what had happened. I also liked how they had a variety of people in a community give their opinions, and how we were given the information on what actually happened, but also given the information that the people in the community believed. I really liked the lighting in the scene where Billy is being passed on from Life to Death, it made everything seem surreal."

"I think that there is not much we can do about violence amongst teens. Really, all you can do is give them guidance, help them understand that what they're doing is wrong. But if guidance seems like punishment for the teens, than they won't listen. What schools in Toronto need, are fun ways to learn and be guided towards doing what's right."

"In my opinion, teen violence is a part of life that will always exist. The only thing we can do is to try and contain it. I believe that the city of Toronto should consider opening a rehabilitation center for these teens instead of placing them in jail. I agree with what they said in the play, jail will only make these kids worse. Instead if these children spent time in a rehab center, they may be able to get back on the right foot and be more successful in life."

"I thought that, overall, this play was very well done. I loved the lighting, and I loved the staging; I thought that both of these aspects

of the play contributed to the theme the actors were trying to communicate in the performance. I thought that the acting was good, too. They, in my opinion, spoke clearly and enunciated well, and some of the actors went to a very deep, uncomfortable, and emotional place to try to make themselves believable, and to try to communicate their ideas to the audience. In particular, I loved the way the personification of Life and Death responded to one another as the plot and conflict in the play progressed, and I think that their qualities helped to communicate the struggle that the characters must have felt as they dealt with the death of one of their classmates.

Today's youth, and today's teens, in particular, are heavily exposed to acts of violence and intolerance. Whether it's in the media, or in our community, violence is an aspect of our society which a lot of teenagers are exposed to. I think that, because it is exposed so glamorously in the media, teenagers today think highly of performing acts of violence around Toronto. I think that, in order for the violence to stop in schools, it needs to stop in the media. We need to control the kinds of things which are shown on television to children. The television could also serve as a source which can tell children of the affects that violence can have on a community, and on peoples' lives. We can also tell children, and teens, of the bad influences that violence can have within our schools. Perhaps, programs can be set

up which can help Toronto's teenagers to understand how violence can tear apart peoples' lives."

"The music choices were very well made and made the situations of the story seem more intense. I liked how all the kids were wearing the same type of clothing to show that the character could be anybody, not just a certain person."

"Obviously, our city faces an extreme and terrible problem of teen violence. This year has brought evidence that tells us something must be done. Many young lives have been taken away for childish reasons, so how do we stop it? I believe that if we engage teens in afterschool activities, they would have less time to do bad things with their friends (drink, bully kids...). This, of course, is not that simple to do because most people can't afford to put their kids in afterschool activities. So I think that the city of Toronto should fund afterschool activities and make them more available to teens. I also think that schools should have many afterschool activities that engage kids with different interests. Doing so, I think that youth violence will not become so common in our city."

"It showed how the people running for mayor were doing nothing only wanting to get in office. The radio is saying nothing letting other people talk for them and saying the ads with more enthusiasm than

the news. The cops simply want to keep them in jail for longer. And the mothers grieve.

I also think that your choice of costumes were appropriate. Death specifically had a good costume. I think that it should be a purple as she seemed to be a person who doesn't look down on things...I agree with the play that there are way too many killings among teens. The city has to do something about this. This play may start something. You might be able to invite a city representative to change their view on the problem and do something about it. This also might tell the teens to stop who are watching the play. I really liked it."

"...in this play, death was caused merely by differences, and by "cliques". Who is to say that this would not happen here? This scares me in a lot of ways, but it also makes me feel more prepared for if this was to happen. If I was a witness to something like that... I don't know what I would do, would I stand and watch? would I call 911? I wouldn't know because I have never been in a situation like that. But it really opened my eyes, and I loved it."

(This is the one piece from a senior student.)

"As for the issue of teens discriminating against each other, and teen bullying, that's a very difficult issue to address. Clearly the environment has a large impact on this...Bullying roots from insecurity

which most likely roots from the environment in which the kid has grown up; if someone is constantly told they are not good enough what do you think they will do to their classmates? Subsequently if a child is told they are doing well and they are encouraged by their parents they have no want to seem "better" than another because they are comfortable with who they are.

In students who do not feel secure about themselves we see the competition of "who is better" and we also see the actions which accompany it: fights to see who is stronger, verbal dissing to see who can hurt the other more etc. From this it now seems very obvious as to why one would bully another, "if I can push him down, that will increase my rank". Some teens become obsessed with this idea of being "cooler" or "better" than one another, and sometimes as a result we see a death in the competition as was shown in the play.

So really I believe that these issues spring from the environment which the teen is in. If the teen is in a very nice, warm, and accepting environment they will have no want to compete for rank as there is none. However in an environment where the leaders reign above the others people may feel inferior if they do not display various egotistical acts or put down others.

The solution is difficult, clearly we cannot change the environment of the teen at his house, but we can have an impact on the

environment at the teens school. There will be some teens who no matter what will still display this competitive nature, but I think many would benefit from a warm and caring environment just as I feel I have benefited from coming to this school. I used to be quite egotistical, but ever since coming to this school this behaviour has almost completely gone away. I cannot relate with many of my previous friends because I do not have the same interests as them anymore." (senior student)

The Plan: the positive response to the workshop production has inspired me to continue to develop *Nothing To Lose*. I am aiming for a 45-60 minute piece with a structured discussion to follow. The play is the first act, the discussion the second act. It would be geared for grade 7-12, though adults, especially parents of teens, would find it meaningful.

I hope to write a full draft this summer and begin a series of readings and workshops throughout the fall. *Nothing To Lose* would be ready for 2011.

There is a sense of déjà vu with this play as it harkens back to an early play of mine called *Steel Kiss* which is about a gay bashing in High Park. *Steel Kiss* premiered in 1987 and had its most recent production in Vancouver, 2008.