



Begin: Animated music clip ("Too Absurd")

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwcEpsylh8s>

Good afternoon.

That was a clip produced as a special project by Peace Child Israel in 2006, at the height of the 2nd Lebanese War. The ADAMAI Ensemble was established in 2005 by some of the artists who had met in a volunteer initiative to record the organization's anthem, "*We Brought Peace Upon Us*" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d_i2F2LIF8) for CD and video in the autumn of 2000 as a call for an end to the violence that had erupted at the beginning of the second intifada in end-September.

I chose to begin with this animated clip because it helps to set the scene and the context of the activity. Another 10 minute film I've brought with me, "*Staging Peace*", that I will screen shortly, will tell the whole story about how the "Du-Drama" theatre advocacy program actually works. For the purpose of this conference, however, I think it's more useful for me to concentrate on create the *mise-en-scene* and share with you how things evolved in light of the volatile and ever-changing context in which the program functioned.

Though it went through many changes over the years, basically, the "Du-Drama" program was always meant to be implemented in a post-conflict environment. And, as we all know, the Middle East is about as far from post-conflict as any environment could be. It was meant to REPAIR majority-minority relations and provide an opportunity for kids who would never ever have a chance to meet, due to the segregated societal circumstances in Israel, a chance to get to know each other. Participants were always volunteers from two neighboring Arab and Jewish schools, because even in "mixed cities" like Haifa and Tel Aviv-Jaffa, the school systems are segregated. Due to the residual and on-going anger based on historical narratives, tribal allegiances, occupation, discrimination, kassam missiles dropping for years on end in the south of the country and a countless number of other examples, no one is rushing to integrate. If anything, the opposite process is present: Palestinian Citizens of Israel – a term unknown to the founders of Peace Child Israel organization – demand to be identified as Palestinians and to enjoy the right of freely identifying with their cultural heritage. Most often these rights are honored and there have been many a demonstration against the State's policy in the major Arab cities such as Nazareth, Jaffa and Um el-Fahem at time of regional wars. The Jews view this as betrayal. In short: a mess, far-removed from post-conflict status.

The "Du-Drama" program operates in a surreal scenario in which 80% of the population celebrates while 20% mourns on one very unique day of every year: Independence Day/Naqbe. In a scenario which forbids formally teaching the Palestinian Naqbe narrative. (We found a way around this stipulation by having the kids write monologues in a role-reversal context, perform them and then debrief. No easy session to say the least). The Palestinian minority is expected to demonstrate and allegiance to the State in which a majority of the Jewish majority go ballistic when the Arabs call themselves Palestinians.

"Some say we're traitors, some say naive". These are lyrics from "Too Absurd" which most accurately convey the stigma of participating in a peace-building program for Jews and Palestinians alike. The recruitment process became increasingly difficult as the political situation continued to deteriorate.

The program began with one single group and one original play back 1988 in Tel Aviv at the height of the 1st intifada. A decade later, when I joined the organization in 1998, PCI had grown into a nationwide operation with six groups active in the field.

During the 1999-2000 cycle that number reached ten, the highest ever. In July 2000, excerpts from all ten shows were performed for the public at-large, hosted by the Mayor of Ra'anana, at the first-time-ever "convention" of all the different groups from north to south, giving these youngsters a sense of being in a "movement". This was to become an annual tradition. July 2000 was an extraordinary and spectacular moment; a real "high". At the end of the night 300 teenagers got up on the stage to sing the new anthem for the very first time with the composer and a mixed Arab-Jewish ensemble of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.



No one could predict that that such a smash-hit event would soon to be followed by a fall into an abyss from which no one has really recovered. The beginning of the second intifada and the "October 2000 Disturbances", during which 13 Arab citizens were killed by Israeli police changed everything.

But, getting back to the subject of using theatre as an advocacy tool, that's what the "Du-Drama" program was all about, long before people coined the phrase. Remember, this was a quarter-century ago. From the outset, the plays served the advocacy objective by role-modeling, awareness-raising and changing attitudes. This component grew through the years. In the early days, a 30-minute play, based on each group's experience, was played to generally "SRO" (standing Room Only) crowds of family and friends in evening performances attended by the mayors and representatives of the Ministry of Education. A decade later, the impact on outer circles had more than quadrupled. Besides the evening "gala", each troupe performed its production for over 2,000 students before concluding its process. This grew even further after a number of "pre and post" evaluation surveys of student audiences produced indicators of measureable attitudinal change after seeing the plays by the young bi-national casts and participating in the talk-backs that followed.



"Just Over the Boardwalk", performance and playback at the Misgav school, 2007

This became the organization's "raison d'être" and the spectator numbers per production grew to 5,000 for each troupe as these heroic youth took on leadership roles. A long-term impact study pointed to the use of theatre as a powerful and effective tool in the survey that was implemented at the 20th anniversary in June 2008, when 13 busloads of alumni converged on the Jerusalem Theatre, including members of the very first groups. The program had touched them in lasting ways. So, we were doing something right. There is no doubt. This is how it was done :

(Film: "Staging Peace" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCtK8D5v8NU>)

Keeping in mind that the program is designed for repair and reconciliation in a post-conflict environment, this was becoming something like theatre of the absurd. And old practices were being tested. In the "booking" process, when schools were offered a show – for free – a reluctancy began proportionately to the violence and rupture between the two populations. The school principals, particularly the Jewish school principals who actually wanted to support the effort, were hesitant about reactions to a play called "Road Block" that a young troupe had developed, and with reason. A young Jewish student standing up and screaming "Death to the Arabs" is not a pretty picture. Believe me, I was there and the crisis management was massive. So, in order to continue with the advocacy objective, a decision was made to begin adapting classics, such as "*Don Quixote*", "*The Little Prince*", "*West Side Story*" and "*Pochahontas*". The scripts were used as a trigger for a discussion about the hear-and-now among the actors. It worked marvelously. For example, the scene of Ratcliff planting the British flag on the shores of the new world was a natural link to issue of land and occupation. The scene in "*West Side Story*" when Anita informs Bernarndo "We're in America now, we have rights", when he tried to forbid his sister Maria from going to the dance in the gym lead to a deeply meaningful discussion about women's rights vis-à-vis the "Family Honor" killings.

The organization continued dealing with sources out of its control in other ways: the advent of Facebook often cancelled the delicately nurtured conversations in the circle and nearly crippled group processes, an issue which I contend, by the way, needs to be addressed by the entire industry of conflict resolution practitioners. But back in our arena, the fallout of violence entered the circle at numerous junctures, even years after an event. The most recent group from Tel Aviv-Jaffa, was a remarkable story featuring the surrealistic dynamics of the program:

Shlomit, the young girl who played one of the two Maria's in our adaptation of "*West Side Story*" in 2010 had a first cousin who had been killed in the 2001 bombing of the Dolfinarium discotheque. In the same group, Gazi, who played Bernardo, kept the fact that 19 members of his family family were killed in collateral damage in the Gaza 2009 War to himself. His friends from his own school knew of course, but it was a real jolt for his new friends from the Jewish school when they finally learned of the tragedy. Yet they worked and played together for two years.



In conclusion, the PCI anthem opened and closed the "Staging Peace" film. The song served as the curtain call for all the shows produced since it was written back in the spring of 2000. The journey since then was cluttered with road blocks, explosions and tears. Yet when the curtain came down, the Palestinian and Jewish kids would sing, in Arabic and Hebrew:

*"And still in our lifetime
And still in our days
We will sing:
We brought peace upon us"*

Thank you.

Melisse Lewine-Boskovich

(play the anthem clip if time permits: " (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d_i2F2LIF8)

“Volunteers for Peace”, November 2000



“West Side Story”, 2010



HABIMA THEATRE HOSTS PCI – JULY, 2010

“Don Quixote”

“The Little Prince”

“Pochahontas, John and Us”



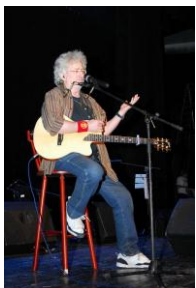
20TH REUNION – JUNE 26, 2008 – “THE BEST OF”



Long-term Impact Study



Stars Salute the Heroes



“Alice in the Holy Land”, Jerusalem, 2000



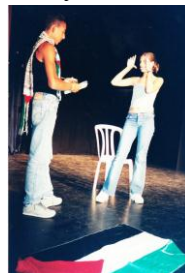
“Maybe”, Sakhnin, 2004



“The Other Side”, Cameri Theatre, 2005



“My House” (talk-back), Nazareth, 2005



“Six Actors in Search of Plot”, professional troupe, 2006

