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“We’re Not Ready for Huck Finn”: An Important Story Struggles to be Told

Harrison Long, Kennesaw State University, United States of America



Figure 1: John Stewart plays Frederick Douglass/Jim (Photo by Robert Pack)

Abstract: What happens when one controversial text meets another in performance? How do diverse audiences from rural and metropolitan areas respond to powerful yet provocative material? The Kennesaw State University Department of Theatre & Performance Studies set out to explore just that with its Frederick Douglass/Huck Finn Arts Education Initiative. The project was called Splittin' the Raft, a dramatic adaptation of Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as interpreted by ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. This ambitious production toured seven North Georgia communities, ranging from inner city schools to rural mountain towns. The production employed "epic theatre" strategies to inspire a new understanding of the present time through an examination of the past. "Raft" featured African-American spirituals, songs by Stephen Foster, and original compositions for fiddle and banjo. Audiences included high school students, educators, community leaders and people of all ages. The company led post-show discussions highlighting current social issues and the dramatic techniques used to create social awareness.¹ This article explores our efforts to deliver Twain's controversial text to a modern student audience.

Key Words: Arts Education, Social Change, Self-Inquiry

This Side of the Mississippi

It is true that we are no longer slaves, but it is equally true that we are not yet quite free.

Frederick Douglass - *Splittin' the Raft*²

Americans have been debating Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (*Huck Finn*) since its initial publication in 1885. Some Americans object to the book because it points up Christian hypocrisy, undermines authority and sets a bad example for kids (*Huckleberry*). Early critics were outraged by Twain's blatant use of the common vernacular. Shouldn't "literature" be elevated? And why write a book in first person from an uneducated child's point of view? Today, *Huck Finn*'s themes of racial identity, religious hypocrisy, class conflict, and the definition of family are as volatile as ever. A number of school districts across the country ban the book because it uses the "N-word" well over two hundred times. Yet, in *Green Hills of Africa*,

¹ Harrison Long, "The Impact of Socially Engaged Theatre Across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins" (Unpublished, 2014).

² Scott Kaiser, *Splittin' the Raft*. 2007. 69.

Ernest Hemingway (another banned author) said: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."³ Like many of our greatest works, including those by Pulitzer Prize winners and Nobel laureates, *Huck Finn* is condemned almost as often as it is praised. Some critics refuse to come down on one side or the other, citing the book's many contradictions. In his collection of essays titled *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Quirk states: "I suspect that neither the book's most avid partisans nor its most vocal detractors would wish to deem *Huckleberry Finn* a politically correct novel." He later goes on to assert that the book "refuses ideology itself."⁴

Despite the progress of recent decades, race is still a highly charged topic in American society. In 2011, Randall Williams, co-owner of NewSouth Books Publishing in Montgomery, Alabama, produced a version of Twain's novel that substituted the word "slave" for the word "nigger." Not surprisingly, the new edition created a wave of controversy all its own. *60 Minutes* interviewed credible advocates on both sides of the debate. Detractors of the new edition claim the Williams text doesn't serve Twain's intentions. According to University of Oregon professor and African American scholar David Bradley: "Without that word it's not *Huckleberry Finn* anymore. . . . This may be [the students'] first encounter with slavery . . . That's one of the reasons you can't mess around with it. There is a reality there that you cannot avoid."⁵ On the other hand Williams, a white southerner who confesses he grew up using the N-word, considers it too divisive: "The word is poison . . . Is the point that these kids should be subjected to pain? I don't see the point of that."⁶ Can we truly understand the ugliness of racism if we sanitize the facts? Conversely, if a word makes people feel uncomfortable why don't we simply cut it? It's a difficult discussion tangled by almost four hundred years of history.

In her keynote address at the 62nd Annual Southeastern Theatre Conference, Atlanta playwright, Pearl Cleage confronts the issue head-on. Cleage, an African American, laments the movement to ban Zora Neale Hurston, August Wilson, Mark Twain and others from the classroom because some of their characters use the N-word. She goes on to articulate (and object to) the implicit and complicated "rules" which govern the word's usage:

No white people are allowed to use the word nigger unless they are engaged in teaching texts where the word appears, participating in discussions where the word itself is being discussed as dispassionately as possible among consenting adults, or creating works of art that require dialogue to reflect time, place and character...Since the word nigger grew out of the peculiar institution of American slavery...its use is limited to the descendants of the people who were held here in bondage during those terrible times. That means, even people of African descent from around the diaspora . . . are not allowed to use the word unless they are given a special dispensation by an African American.⁷

In reference to Williams' new edition of *Huck Finn*, Cleage questions whether the substitution is any improvement: "Why is it better to be called a "slave" than to be called a 'nigger?'"⁸ She asserts that writers may need the word in order to accurately establish "time, place and the specific world view of a character."⁹ And yet regardless of an author's intentions, there are those who only hear the N-word and nothing else.

Twain's feelings about slavery during the period when he wrote *Huck Finn* are clear: he abhorred it. "By 1869 he knew and admired Frederick Douglass, who in 1838 had been one of many fugitive slaves helped by Clemens's [Twain's] abolitionist in-laws, the Langdons, and who had published [Douglass'] famous *Narrative* in 1845."¹⁰ Coincidentally, Twain and Douglass, both veterans of the lecture circuit, shared the same booking agent, James Redpath, a prominent abolitionist.

³ Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 22.

⁴ Tom Quirk, "Is Huckleberry Finn Politically Correct?" in *Coming to Terms with Huckleberry Finn: Essays on a Book, a Boy and a Man*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 147.

⁵ *60 Minutes*, "Huckleberry Finn and the N-word Debate," CBS, March 20, 2011

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pearl Cleage, "The Nigger Speech." *Southern Theatre*, Summer 2011, 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "The Challenge of Teaching *Huckleberry Finn*," in *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom*, ed., by James S. Leonard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 187-188.



Figure 2: Annie Power as Huckleberry Finn

(Photos by Robert Pack)



Figure 3: John Stewart as Frederick Douglass

In a crucial moral emergency a sound heart is a safer guide than an ill-trained conscience . . . the conscience—that unerring monitor—can be trained to approve any wild thing you want it to approve if you begin its education early and stick to it.

Mark Twain ¹¹

Huck's greatest quality is his *uncivilized* purity of heart, but his developing conscience pulls him in the opposite direction. Through Huck's naivety, injustice is revealed rather than perpetuated; Huck is only led astray by those who would "sivilize" him.¹² In her essay "The Challenge of Teaching Huckleberry Finn", Shelly Fisher Fishkin states: "By presenting a racist society through the eyes of a child too innocent to question its norms, Twain forces readers to judge that society on their own."¹³ She goes on to contradict those who call the novel racist, asserting that Huck's point of view and Twain's are "distinct from one another."¹⁴ In a 1991 interview with Fishkin, legendary author Ralph Ellison agrees that those critics "are making the same old mistake of confusing the narrator with the author."¹⁵

So why does the novel remain so controversial? Dramatic irony doesn't seem like a difficult concept to grasp. Social satires like *Saturday Night Live*, *South Park* or the *Tonight Show* are mainstays of American entertainment, especially among young people. But when irony crops up in time-honored texts, young adults (and older ones too)

¹¹ Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo, eds., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: The Only Authoritative Text*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) xxii-xxiii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "The Challenge of Teaching Huckleberry Finn," in *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom*, ed., by James S. Leonard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 189.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

may have difficulty looking beyond the literal. When a work of literature achieves classical stature, students may take it so seriously they are unable to comprehend an author's *playful* method of communicating serious matters.¹⁶ As an acting teacher, I encounter this frequently with students who are working with Shakespeare for the first time. It takes young actors a while to stop standing stiff-legged and start using their own voices instead of phony British accents. Similarly, Fiskin tells of students at the University of Texas who, when required to read Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, found the book "neither ironic, nor funny but horrifying."¹⁷

Secondly, irony can be difficult to understand when applied to historical contexts different from our own. The significance of a character's actions may be misinterpreted when they aren't accompanied by a clear understanding of the social circumstances in which they occur.

Thirdly, in an age of sophisticated computer graphics and rapid-fire editing, we have become more visually facile but less verbally so. As a culture, we simply have less practice interpreting and participating in verbal play. Also, the rhythm with which we change focus is much faster than it once was. The increased number of media sources and the rapidity with which we experience them may mean we are examining more content but doing it less thoroughly.

Finally, we must consider the volatility of the subject matter. If we truthfully examine where we've come from, we can't avoid looking at the uncomfortable truth of where we are today. And if we do that, there's no way to avoid seeing our responsibility for the future. It's human nature to want to avoid the ugly truth.

These were the obstacles we had to overcome in order to address the complex questions raised by *Splittin' the Raft*. It was anybody's guess if we would be able to do so successfully. The choice to move forward was purely an act of faith.



Figure 4: Shannon & Rob perform outdoors as the Duke and the King

(Figure 4 photo by Raven DeGarmo. Fig. 5 by Robert Pack)

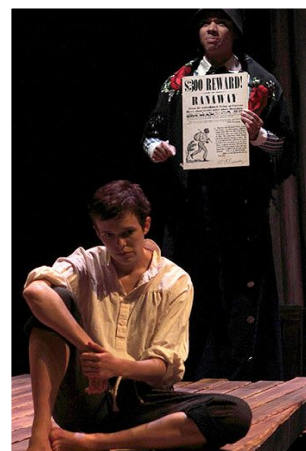


Figure 5: Huck struggles with his conscience. The Widow Douglass laments the loss Jim.

Building a Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Scott Kaiser understood the challenges of adapting Twain's novel for the stage. In 1998, I was working as an actor in Ashland, Oregon where Kaiser serves as and Head of Voice and Text for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. At the time Scott was rehearsing a workshop production of *Huck Finn*, which eventually toured regional schools. I use the term "production" loosely because there were few costumes or props and hardly any scenic elements other than a chair and a handful of other small pieces. Sterile fluorescent tubes illuminated a sparse room, ill suited for theatrical

¹⁶ I use the word 'play' not to indicate a lack of seriousness for a given subject matter, but as a description of any creative expression intended to entertain as well as teach. We may read the works of Shakespeare, but we go to the theatre to see his *plays*.

¹⁷ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "The Challenge of Teaching *Huckleberry Finn*," in *Making Mark Twain Work in the Classroom*, ed., by James S. Leonard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 183.

events. Still, I was genuinely entertained and moved. Sometime later, Scott completed the play. He titled it *Splittin' the Raft* and added his masterstroke: casting orator, ex-slave and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass as narrator.

I have become more and more convinced that a philosophy of 'the text and nothing but the text' is irresponsible and counterproductive when it comes to bringing this book into today's classroom... Sometimes a work of art can be a lens through which a moment in history is refracted with unprecedented clarity and brilliance. *Huck Finn* is such a work—but only if we allow our students to read it against the backdrop of that history. 18

Framing the play with Douglass' writings accomplishes several things. First, it reveals the novel's larger historical context, clarifying any confusion the audience might have about the production's intentions. The play begins with Douglass holding Twain's book, addressing the audience as if on the lecture circuit where he famously advanced the cause of freedom. We understand immediately that Twain's story is intended to support Douglass' argument. Through Douglass, Kaiser inserts historical snapshots throughout the play, providing the backdrop we need to interpret each character's actions. In one scene, we watch a slave being whipped in shadow play while Douglass reads the list of trivial offenses for which a slave might receive the brutal punishment. In another scene, he narrates the pitiful story of a slave husband and wife who are sold apart. The slave trader lasciviously peddles the wife while her husband looks on, helplessly shackled. None of these events appear in Twain's novel, but they surely help us to understand it.

Secondly, by contrasting "the play" with "the play within the play," we see both worlds more vividly. For example: a single actor plays both the escaped slave Jim and Douglass, jumping seamlessly back and forth between the two characters. The rapid juxtaposition illuminates the social forces behind slavery and its deeply personal cost to the individual and to society. It is painful to watch the eloquent Douglass stripped of his fine clothes and reduced to the wretched runaway Jim. Furthermore, Kaiser's framing reveals the literary context of the play. By placing Twain's language next to the words of Frederick Douglass, we are able to understand both texts more fully. In one scene, Kaiser splices the narrator's lofty rhetoric with one of Pap's racist diatribes. The juxtaposition clarifies and magnifies both speeches.

Finally the play, like the novel, is very imaginative and highly entertaining. "Raft" is fast-paced theatre. It is exciting to watch only four actors transform into thirty-one characters. Despite the serious subject matter, there are some hilarious situations. The script also includes wonderful music including African-American spirituals. A single musician plays multiple instruments and creates amusing sound effects to accompany the action. But while Kaiser's script does much to clarify *Huck Finn*'s important message, we knew we needed to make a few efforts of our own.

To that end we created a production website featuring historical research, a study guide, class activities, production photos, design sketches and a film documentary about the creative process. We included character descriptions and biographical information about Frederick Douglass and Mark Twain. There are external web links, article clippings about related current events and a recommended reading list. Knowing how visually sophisticated young audiences are we posted a rotating photo gallery, which included Thomas Hart Benton's powerful mural of Huck and Jim, and a photo of the house in Hannibal, Missouri said to be the home of the boy on whom Huck was based. We hoped to provide the historical, literary and theatrical background students would need to fully experience the production. Most of the material described above can still be found at: <http://www.kennesaw.edu/theatre/SplittinTheRaft/html/students-reading.html>.¹⁹

Our ambitious project won support from the National Endowment for the Arts through their Arts Education in American Communities grant. The award funded a tour of seven North Georgia communities, ranging from inner city schools to rural mountain towns. Given the budget crunch in our public schools, I thought the project would be an easy sell to educators. After all, we were offering a *free* production based on a seminal work of American literature combined with some of the most inspiring civil rights rhetoric in our country's history. We were also providing extensive classroom support. The months to come, however, taught us a great deal about the challenges associated with socially engaged theatre.

Courageous Partners Wanted

Ours was the first production of *Splittin' the Raft* to be staged in the Deep South. Months of struggling to arrange tour dates taught me why. Several of the community organizations I initially contacted signed on immediately. Over

¹⁸ Ibid., 189.

¹⁹ *Splittin' the Raft*, 2011. Website.

the next few months, however, most of those who had eagerly agreed to host the production withdrew, fearing the same kind of backlash Twain's novel has provoked since its publication. I had realized, of course, that the novel was controversial. Still, I was surprised by the level of apprehension we encountered from those who claimed they agreed with what we were "trying to do" but who feared political backlash.²⁰

One suburban school district had booked two performances of the play in their new high school auditorium, a student show in the morning and another for community members that evening. Only two weeks before our arrival, the district withdrew its invitation to perform for the students. School administrators suggested teachers might encourage classes to attend for extra credit. A few days later, however, the teachers were firmly instructed not to mention the performance in *any* context. An email from the school superintendent:

The decision was made based on the use of certain words in the piece. While I am able to appreciate the fact that certain terms are and were used in literature then and today, we feel our student body, as a whole, will not be able to appreciate some of the vernacular in the production...However, we did want to make the date available to you for the performance as requested, but it would be as an outside entity using the facility.²¹

Less than a week before the performance, the district refused to waive the auditorium's rental fee as is customary for free events sponsored by the local cultural arts organization. In effect, they had kicked us out of the performance space they had promised to provide. At the last minute, we were forced to rent a large tent and space heaters (by then it was early November!).

Apprehension about the play's content wasn't limited to school administrators. The artistic director of a prominent suburban theatre company, recognized for producing substantive works, expressed interest in hosting a student performance on a day when no performance was scheduled. I had discussed the project with an African American woman who was a member of the local school board and whose enthusiasm suggested the collaboration was a good fit. But when I followed up with the artistic director, who had been excited about our visit, I was told the company was no longer willing to host us because of the "additional burden" the visit would place on its staff. I assured him that we were accustomed to operating with virtually no additional staff or technical support. We only required the staff person who was already on the clock. Sadly, this made no difference.

In spite of several cancellations, we were happy to be invited to perform at a teaching museum affiliated with one of the larger metropolitan school districts in our area. I received positive feedback from the curator even after she discussed the project with district area heads. I was encouraged that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is included on the list of novels English teachers may assign. (Many other local districts are not so bold.) I was surprised, therefore, to receive a voicemail from the curator who told me that one of the curriculum coordinators had blocked us, saying: "We're just not ready for Huck Finn."

Over the summer, all but one of our six initial partner organizations backed out. But I was passionate about the project. I had spent a good deal of political capital drumming up support for the project within the university. If the production was a failure, it might destroy any credibility I had within the academy. Quite simply, I was desperate.

My family has lived in North Georgia for several generations. My father, both of my grandfathers and my uncles were all United Methodist ministers, which meant they frequently moved around the North Georgia area and were considered prominent members of the communities they served. In short, my family has "connections" in this part of the state.

Once I made the decision to reach out to family friends, it didn't take long to make contact with someone willing to sign on without fretting about the play's content or the political fallout it might cause.²² I also called in favors from every Georgia high school teacher I had ever known. When one school was courageous enough to give us a chance, it made other connections a little easier. At long last, our tour dates were set! All I had to do now was pull the production together. The hard part was over, right?²³

²⁰ Harrison Long, "The Impact of Socially Engaged Theatre Across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins" (Unpublished, 2014).

²¹ Unnamed, e-mail message to author, October 26, 2011.

²² Long

²³ Ibid.



Figure 6: Shannon as Jim's daughter



Figure 7: Rob as the King

(Photos by Robert Pack)

Epic Theatre Strategies

"Kaiser's *Splittin' the Raft* is "epic" in structure. "Epic theatre is the umbrella phrase used by Bertolt Brecht to characterize his theatre of social commentary. The term 'epic' recalls the ancient genre of the long narrative poem. The epic mode of performance tells something about the past rather than showing it in a present tense, dialogue-based form."²⁴

Epic theatre scenes are episodic; each has its own integrity rather than serving a linear plot structure. The genre is overtly theatrical, deliberately reminding the audience that they are watching a play. For example: Brecht often interrupts his scenes with songs, allowing for the audience to reflect on preceding events. In contrast with the Stanislavsky System, which emphasizes emotional truth, Brecht believed that if audiences identified too closely with a character, they would lose the ability to examine that character's actions objectively. Brecht didn't intend to avoid pathos altogether, but rather to manipulate the scale of audience-character identification, strategically eliciting both judgment *and* empathy. Rather than having a purely cathartic experience, Brecht hoped the audience would leave the theatre motivated to bring about social change.

Our department chose to produce *Splittin' the Raft* because it provided a unique opportunity to explore epic theatre techniques. The previous spring I had taught an acting course on Brecht in conjunction with our production of *The Good Person of Szechuan*. We had seen how effective the techniques could be when applied to Brecht's own work. Would they work as successfully with a quintessentially American text? In any case, it would be exciting to create theatre relevant to our own place and time. Beyond the play's commentary on race, it had a lot to say about gender inequality, socioeconomic disparity, and the definition of family, all hot topics in our region.

The production would be actor-centered from start to finish. The company began by meticulously examining the text and gathering historical research. We read Twain's novel and Frederick Douglass' famed slave narrative. We searched for contradictions within each character and discovered ways to point them up in performance. In keeping with the epic style, actors would morph from character-to-character in plain sight of the audience. In this way our staging would illustrate that human nature is changeable rather than fixed. It was also important to make familiar behaviors seem "strange" in order to invoke the critical judgment of our audience. For example: Annie Power, who played Huck, awkwardly impersonated a girl in the scene with Mrs. Loftus, played by the distinctly *unfeminine* Rob Hadaway. The crusty redneck Mr. Loftus was played in turn by Shannon Sparks, an African American woman. Cross-gender casting made this scene hilarious because it enabled us to lampoon familiar gender roles more effectively.

The rehearsal process was the most challenging any of us had ever encountered. There was no honest way to explore this material without bumping into our own finely tuned prejudices. But we also found moments of great humor and joy. After an intensely emotional and rewarding rehearsal period, our campus performances were a resounding success.

²⁴ Meg Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 171.

It's one thing to perform controversial material within the cocoon of a campus black box theatre. People *expect* to find challenging art on a college campus. It's quite another to invade schools and communities where we would expose students and other unlikely theatregoers to socially critical work. The previous months had taught me to expect powder keg reactions.²⁵



Figure 8: The cast of *Splittin' the Raft* hosts a post-show discussion with Newton County high school students. (Photo by Raven DeGarmo)

In the Schools

Newton County, the site of our first school performance, is only a few miles away from my hometown of Conyers, Georgia. Our publicist wisely played the “native son” card and arranged an interview with the local newspaper. When the well-meaning reporter referred to students as “a captive audience” my life flashed briefly before my eyes. All the fear and distrust I had experienced from school administrators over the summer came rushing back. While I believed in the project more than ever, I really had no idea how students and their teachers would respond. So with trepidation, I sat in the back of the Newton High School auditorium observing the ranks of raucous students, about fifty percent of whom were African American, filing in for the performance. One teacher stood sternly lecturing his students to “Look for the symbolism, the metaphor, the SIMILES!” Why not beg them to *hate* us? I thought. I concealed my fear of being publicly denounced as a bigot and fervently prayed for divine intervention.

In a last minute stroke of brilliance, I asked John Stewart, the charismatic young man who played Frederick Douglass, to offer a curtain speech preparing the students for what they were about to witness. As an attractive young man closer to their age, he would have much more sway than I could ever command as a middle-aged suburbanite wearing horn-rimmed glasses. When John entered the stage in costume, the students giggled and shushed one another. He introduced himself, told the kids to turn off their cell phones and politely asked for their kind attention. Then he said: “You’re going to hear some racially sensitive language so don’t be shocked. We are doing this because we want to show you the truth about history, the good, the bad and the ugly.” The room exploded with applause and I breathed an enormous sigh of relief.

Student Responses:

You helped me understand how bad things were back then and why we’re still dealing with it today.

I’m glad you didn’t sugarcoat the past. We get one version of history in the classroom and it’s pretty watered down. Then the bell rings, we walk out into the hall and we get the harsh reality. I hear the N-word all the time. I even use that word with my friends. I don’t think I’m going to do that so much anymore...This play didn’t water down the truth.

²⁵ Ibid.

*This production is a call to action.*²⁶

The conversation following our first school performance was exactly the affirmation we needed. The students' energy and excitement fueled the actors in a way they hadn't experienced before. After the show, student comments were earnest and insightful. Along with their teachers, the young people helped us discover new aspects of the play and its modern social applications. Several students pointed out that the live performance helped them understand slavery in a more vivid way than they had previously experienced it in the movies or on television. Some students even claimed the show would change the way they related to one another in the halls or in the neighborhood. There were similar responses everywhere we went.

The performance was exceptional and inspiring. The kids really got the point of the play. I was so excited! . . . Again, thank you.

Donavan Murdock – Assistant Principal
Maynard Jackson High School, Atlanta²⁷

Ten days before we performed at Maynard Jackson High, an inner city school, Troy Davis, an African American, was executed by the State of Georgia. Governor Sonny Perdue refused a stay of execution despite protests and compelling evidence calling Davis' guilt into question. This fact, in my opinion, had a significant impact on the way Jackson High students received our production.

The school, which is approximately 96 percent African American, was willing to take a chance on "Raft" because I had brought a group of students to perform Shakespeare scenes a few years earlier; we had developed trust. I was excited about returning to Jackson and to hear reactions from the students; many of whom I'm told, had never seen a live play.

The students were surprisingly quiet, almost somber for the first half of the show, but when the second act began with a slave auction, they became more restless. My general impression is that the scene made them uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the post-show discussion illustrated a strong understanding of our performance techniques and the students' ability to apply the play's themes to relevant current events.

At one point a young man shot out of his chair. With suppressed emotion, he began to talk about the Troy Davis execution as evidence of slavery's continuing legacy. Immediately several students tried to suppress him, the assumption being that our white company members would find the topic distasteful. Once the students were reassured that their thoughts would be heard, however, we had a sobering conversation about the disproportionate numbers of African American men who currently sit on death row.



Figures 9 and 10: The full company of *Splittin' the Raft* conducts a post-show discussion. (Photos by Raven DeGarmo)

²⁶ This project received approval from the Kennesaw State University Internal Review Board. Student quotes are anonymous and limited to those who were at least eighteen years old. Even though the younger students made excellent comments and observations, we found it too cumbersome to retrieve the necessary parental consent forms. However, the sample comments above reflect what we heard from high school students of all ages.

²⁷ E-mail message to author.

We are in a decidedly rural and largely impoverished area. The chances of the majority of our students observing such a performance were extremely rare.

Linda Orwig – Fine Arts Teacher, Lumpkin County High School ²⁸

Many of our students would otherwise never experience a live performance.

Elizabeth Gregory - Councilor, Eastside High School ²⁹

There were other student performances at Lumpkin County High School, in the rural North Georgia Mountains, and at the Strand Theatre in suburban Marietta, where several local schools bussed students in for the event. A group of home-schooled students attended one performance. Two senior citizens' groups attended the Strand date. The students were enrapt as the older members of the audience detailed their experiences coming of age in the Jim Crow South. Happily, there was never any confusion about our intent. In fact, no student, teacher, administrator or community member voiced a single objection to Kaiser's uncensored text *once they had seen the performance*.

Looking Back/Looking Forward

Twain's masterpiece is more than well-crafted literature; it is an entertaining reflection of the American conscience. *Huck Finn* is provocative because it reminds us where we have fallen short of the American promise of freedom. "Liberty and justice for all" is not something we achieved long ago. It is a *living* principle and must be nurtured like any living organism. ³⁰ Our greatest authors, orators and artists are entrusted with this sacred task. But in order to preserve their works, we must equip our students with the historical and literary contexts necessary to fully comprehend them.

Theatre can bring timeless texts to life for students. School performances can create a unique forum for constructive dialogue between students and teachers, between performers and audiences. As Bertolt Brecht came to realize, we must entertain *before* we teach. When student audiences engage in the act of play, they are free to examine social issues on a more objective level. But play also helps us experience on a more *human* level. That's when we can apply what we observe on the stage to our own social contexts. ³¹

Our experiences with *Splittin' the Raft* taught us a great deal about the art of theatre-making; the production showed students how theatre *can* be a tool for social change. *Splittin' the Raft* gave people a forum to discuss the things people don't talk about and often don't *want* to talk about. The nature of this highly entertaining production allowed people to open up and approach difficult issues with a spirit of mutual respect. Rarely do artists witness such positive, tangible and immediate results from their work. The project let high school students experience history, literature, music, and theatre in a new and *visceral* way--a way only possible because we, quite literally, met them on their own turf. My work as an artist and educator has never been more relevant and fulfilling.

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²⁸ E-mail message to author.

²⁹ E-mail message to author.

³⁰ Harrison Long, "The Impact of Socially Engaged Theatre Across Communities: A Tale of Two Slave Cabins" (Unpublished, 2014).

³¹ Ibid.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harrison Long has worked in the professional theatre since 1986. He is an alumnus of Florida State University (BFA), Southern Methodist University (MFA), the Actor's Center in New York City and Richard Schechner's Performance Workshop at Tisch School of the Arts, NYU. In 1999 he traveled to Indonesia to study Balinese Theatre, Shadow Puppetry, and Mask Making. New York acting credits include the title role in *Henry V* (Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival), Athol Fugard's *A Lesson From Aloysius* (78th Street Theatre Lab) and *Bloomsday On Broadway* (Symphony Space). American regional credits include People's Light and Theatre Company, Clarence Brown Theatre and the Utah Shakespearean Festival. He currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia where he has performed with the Alliance Theatre, Georgia Shakespeare, Theatre in the Square, Theatrical Outfit, 7 Stages, Theatre Emory and Georgia Ensemble Theatre, where he was a founding company member. Most recently Long directed an award-winning revival of Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* at Serenbe Playhouse. He currently serves as Interim Associate Dean of the Kennesaw State University, College of the Arts and as Artistic Director within the Department of Theatre & Performance Studies.