

Educational Improv

Over lunch last fall, faculty members from Suffolk University gathered to watch a history class fall apart. As a befuddled professor strained to steer the conversation to the week's reading on the Boston Tea Party, his students got mired in an argument. "I mean, aren't *India* Indians, Indians now? Do you know what I mean?" asked a senior. "'Native Americans' isn't even the politically correct term anymore," interjected a freshman, rolling her eyes.

The scene came from "Teaching Beyond the Timeline," by Harvard's resident improv troupe, the Bok Players. Based at the Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, they use theater activities to educate audiences. "DEIA—diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, in whatever order—is the heartbeat of the work that we do," explains artistic director Mara Sidmore. The players are mostly professional actors, whose other credits range from *Shear Madness* to Shakespeare to portraying "standardized patients" in medical schools. During rehearsals, they go over lines, and also other show elements: How big is the audience? Is attendance mandatory, or voluntary? What are the demographics of the student body? They adapt each performance to its venue.

For them, the play's only half the thing: after a sketch ends, the actors stay in character for a "talkback" in which the audience asks about their motivations. (Everyone involved is impressively committed: at Suffolk, Sidmore polled the characters about how "class" had gone, nodded thoughtfully at their answers, and thanked them for their honesty.) After that, the real fun begins. Faculty members are invited on stage to act out other ways the scene could have unfolded and afterward, the actors help them role-play similarly "hot" moments from their real work lives.

The Bok Players formed in 2007, in response to a recommendation from the Task Force on Women in Science and Engineering (itself a response to the firestorm sparked by former Harvard president Lawrence H. Summers's comments on women's "intrinsic aptitude" in those fields): all science doctoral students should take a pedagogical training course with a component on gender bias. Lee Warren, then an associate director at the Bok Center, had been inspired by a University of Michigan teaching troupe to try interactive theater at Harvard. "No faculty member wants to go to a training session on diversity," she says. "They just think they'll throw up!"

The players' first sketch, "Trouble in the Lab," was about an untenured researcher wading into a fight involving a female first-year, a short-tempered older student, and an absent-minded



Mara Sidmore

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postdoc. At early performances, reactions were mixed. "It's not obvious to me how this matters," one student complained to a reporter from *Nature*. "The problems in the play weren't real problems, like faked data."

But administrators were impressed, and various Harvard departments kept requesting the players' help—including one major early client, Catalyst, the center for clinical medical research. So they spun off more scripts: "Sign Here" explored ethics in obtaining consent from study participants; "The Right Fit" tackled a faculty hiring committee. As word spread, they started performing at Boston hospitals and schools throughout New England. With this steady line of work, the Bok Players weathered the financial crisis and a five-year institutional limbo when Harvard severed ties with them in 2010. Posters from the time advertised "New plays commissioned on request" and "Improvational programs tailored to client needs," and even offered one-on-one coaching.

Today, the troupe finds itself turning some performance requests down. As Sidmore sees it, "We need to focus on how we fit into the Center, because otherwise we're just sort of this satellite program." Now incorporated into the Bok Center's larger Applied Theatre Initiative, the players also run "Theater Lab," a workshop in which Bok staff discuss how theater concepts can be adapted into teaching tools. (At one session last semester, participants learned acting warm-ups, and pantomimed "The Three Little Pigs.") They also provide course support, plying their trade in classroom settings. Recently, faculty members have called them in to coach students for a class debate, and to role-play as clients seeking legal advice on the benefits of marriage versus a civil union.

Sidmore, meanwhile, says she's on the lookout for longer-term "strategic alliances" throughout the University. Maybe, she suggests, the Office of Student Life would be interested in developing training materials connected to the "Me, Too" movement, or the Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging will inspire more faculty programming.

A Bok Players performance can be a surreal cocktail: one part corporate-sensitivity workshop, one part avant-garde performance art, served up by actors radiating the can-do cheer of summer-camp counselors. Yet the ritual of roleplay seems to have intrinsic power. "If you embody it, there's something that happens with the person you're embodying it with, where you're able to see, suddenly, 'Oh, *that's* what that person perceived,'" says Sidmore. "And it's often kind of a release."

As Lee Warren puts it, theater "gets people below the neck. It's not just the heads working."

~SOPHIA NGUYEN



A freshman's hand flies up during the Bok Players' performance at Rhode Island School of Design.

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