



“Where are my girls at?” An Interview with Katie Cappiello

In a theatrical performance in New York City, 10-year-old Winnifred Bonjean-Alpart described the lack of healthy role models for girls. "Maybe if we spent more time focusing on the women who matter, we could stop comparing ourselves to the women who don't."

I had the privilege of attending two performances by students in Katherine Cappiello's PossEble Theater Lab on December 15, 2007 in New York City. Two different works, *Keep Your Eyes Open* (the first show) and *Balancing Act*, by two different troupes – both amazing, vibrant, personal and challenging. Students, all between the ages of eight and twelve, had developed personal vignettes that captured Tween years' struggles. These weren't trivial sitcom variety pieces, but looks into values, belonging, growing up amidst confining expectations. I interviewed Katie about her process and how theater can support character development in our youth.

SA: First, Congratulations! Great theater experience – not just a great *kids'* theater experience. I was blown away by the level of integrity, vulnerability and maturity I saw in the performances. Seeing these young actors center stage talking with the audience with strength and trust. Just amazing. It mirrors what we at ethiKids are hoping to support with our products – open and relevant dialogue.

SA: How did you and your business partner, Meg McInerney, work with your students to make this possible?

KAC: Theater is a wonderful facilitator of honesty and openness, presenting truth and reality in order to stimulate thought and discussion. Kids can be so brave on the stage because their objective is clear. They understand it's their job as actors to present the full human experience—the good, the bad, *and* the ugly! With this group in particular, Meg and I simply created the opportunity and gave them the power. We told the company that in rehearsal and on stage they could say all the things they always wanted *and* needed to say.

However, we knew establishing trust was the key to success, so we had the girls create an “Actor's Contract”. The terms and conditions were debated, discussed, and finally agreed upon, with the first and most important being “We promise to support and encourage one another in taking creative and personal risks.” Well, that was it. The floodgates opened and the rest is history! We couldn't be happier!

Yesterday, we met for the first time since the show and the holiday break. The girls were so thrilled to be back together. One of my students, Alexandra, said to me and I'm sure she won't mind if I quote her: “I am just so happy to be back here. You know, before I joined this company I had all these thoughts and opinions. I thought I was the only one thinking the things I was thinking. Now in this room and on the stage I feel so empowered---I can put all these things OUT THERE and I feel so much better!”

SA: Tell me about your experience with children and theatre:

KAC: My parents are both public school teachers and I was definitely bit by the teaching bug at an early age. I started teaching performing arts to kids back in Boston when I was 15, so when I began my studies at NYU, I was determined to make theater education a part of my life in the city. I was head teacher with The Young Actors Program at The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute for 5 years, teaching *The*

Method [a sense memory based technique practiced by acting heavyweights such as Marlon Brandon, Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro, & Angelina Jolie] to 7, 8, and 9 year-olds! Kids are fearless and can do anything—whether it's *The Method*, sketch comedy, Shakespeare - if you provide the "safe place"!

It was at Lee Strasberg that I met 7 year-old Celia Rose T. Fitzgerald, a student who impressed me with her openness and sensitivity in everything she did. When Celia died in 2005, her memory inspired the creation of my theater company, PossEble Theater, and the establishment of an arts outreach program designed for NYC public schools. We are currently teaching with I CAN ACT! in several schools and using theater to teach/enhance language skills. I teach Shakespearean Studies and HipHop at The Dalton School. We also direct our Jr. Theater Company, The PossEble Theater Lab, an elite group of young actors who spend the year writing original scripts for production.

Everyday I learn more and more about how receptive kids are to the power of theater for them - it gives them a chance to put on different hats, step into different shoes, to express themselves without the threat of "right" and "wrong"! It's a perfect match, in my opinion.

SA: What's the connection between playing characters and developing character?

KAC: Theater requires a great amount of sensitivity and empathy from its players. When you are "playing" characters, it is your responsibility to understand what makes your character tick, what makes them do the things they do, and even say the words they say. I always remind my students that it is not their job to judge their characters or make fun of their characters by portraying them as caricatures or stereotypes. Instead, why not step up to the challenge and actually delve inside their characters, "become" their characters, and exist as their characters? Characters, then, can no longer be labeled "good guy" or "bad guy", "cool girl" or "weird girl"—the characters now become complex kids, just like the students themselves, with very specific wants and needs, who are exposed everyday to difficult choices.

Role-playing and character-playing creates a "safe place" for students to explore and analyze the rewards and consequences that arise when facing ethical dilemmas. Playing a character further develops three essential qualities necessary in building strong *character*: understanding, sensitivity, and responsibility.

SA: In some ways, children are playing out roles written for them everyday? And being involved in playwriting and performance is a way to express individuality. Hard to get your hands around, isn't it?

KAC: The world must seem like one big contradiction to kids as values being taught are then challenged constantly. We live in a culture that doesn't reward individuality - especially at a young age (we do see the benefits later in life but that is not always a helpful point to a group of kids looking for immediate gratification). As a child it is hard to come to grips with the reality that the "right" (ethical) choice comes with very little reward and usually is accompanied with a significant social sacrifice. It is easier to conform - conformity is applauded - whether it's begging for that \$80 pair of "Juicy" pants so you can have what all your friends have or picking on Jack at lunch because you would rather *he* be the odd man out than you. These choices are met with instant positive reinforcement - you *will* have more friends, people *will* think you're cool - you are "safe". Conformity makes life at 10 or 15 or 20 a whole lot the easier.

I see it as my job as a theater director to create a space where conformity is not rewarded - an artistic, *but also social*, environment where students reap benefits when challenging "the pack"!

SA: Why theatre for you?

KAC: That’s a hard question. I grew up in the outskirts of Boston in a neighborhood with significant economic and cultural challenges - it was almost impossible to not feel suffocated, even trapped. I was painfully shy, and despite my parents and teachers efforts to pull me out of my shell, it wasn’t until I stepped into my first acting class that I felt I had found a “safe place”. As cliché as this may sound, theater was the key to unlocking my self-confidence; it kept me inspired and focused in all areas of my life; it allowed me to find my voice; and it was my ticket “out and up”! - and off to NYU.

There is *nothing* like theater. Whether you are witnessing or actually creating the piece, simply being involved with the telling of a living, breathing story allows for an emotional and sensory experience only possible in the theater arts. Theater has great anthropological power, showing us who we are and where we’ve been, challenging our thought processes, and making us question our world and ourselves. I love how theater blurs the lines between fiction and reality; I love that theater gives a *live* voice to the voiceless.

SA: What have you learned about character development?

KAC: Character development is a never-ending process. Even as adults, our character is challenged everyday. It is a skill and technique, like any other, that needs to be exercised! I believe developing strong character comes with trial and error - sometimes making the “right choice” and understanding the rewards and consequences - sometimes making the “wrong choice” and understanding the rewards and consequences - and finally always *accepting* that we are responsible for each and every choice we make. As educators and/or parents we need to ignite an open character discussion. Let’s talk about it!

SA: Most children don’t have access to programs like this. Any suggestions on what parents and teachers can do to provide some similar experiences?

KAC: First and foremost, encourage a debate. This is one of the most important components of my class - my students debate - with me or with each other; they feel free to hash it out, to question one another. Allow movies, TV, and books to simulate discussion. The first thing I do with my junior theater company is ask the group members about the books they’re reading and movies/TV shows they’re watching. I then make sure I’m up to speed. This creates the opportunity to analyze the various characters: why did s/he make certain choices, what pressures were being felt, what did s/he need and want that lead her/him to act a certain way, what was the result, and what could the s/he have done differently?

Try some role-playing. Create various scenarios in which a character is faced with difficult choices - make sure you experiment with both the “right” choice and the “wrong” choice - then discuss. A way to make this fun: video the scenes - create your very own talk show or “reality TV” show.

Last but not least, if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. The media isn’t going anywhere, the tabloids aren’t going anywhere, and the evening news is here to stay. Use it—don’t pretend like it isn’t happening! Our kids are growing-up in a culture where their heroes are using steroids, their favorite *teen* stars are in and out of rehab and/or having babies, and the stories the 6:00 news should be rated PG-13. Use these headlines to have heart to heart discussions with your kids about motivation, consequences, etc. They want to talk to you about it!

For more tips and discussion topics, I have found these websites helpful:

www.campaignforrealbeauty.com and www.whyville.net - great resources for parents, teachers, and kids of all ages.

SA: What's next for your students?

KAC: Hopefully, the NYC International Fringe Festival! Crossing fingers! We will continue to write and re-write our new piece and in the spring we'll begin production - costume, set, sound, light design - and prepare of our June performances. Basically, we'll just keep training, debating, challenging our audiences and ourselves, and having fun! That's the great thing about New York City - a group of courageous 10 and 11 year-old girls can push the boundaries and question their world! That's what it's all about, right? That's great art.

SA: Thanks to Katie and Meg and all the girls who performed in the PossEble Theater Lab.