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**Digging *Holes*: Milwaukee Youth's Response to Socially and Politically
Driven Theatre**

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**Digging *Holes*: Milwaukee Youth's Response to Socially and Politically
Driven Theatre**

by

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Dedication

For anyone that has been a Zero.

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Abstract

Digging *Holes*: Milwaukee Youth's Response to Socially and Politically Driven Theatre

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This study considers the impacts of First Stage Children's Theatre's 2004 production of *Holes* on the community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The goal of this research is to investigate the relationship between political engagement and youth theatre impact in the Milwaukee community over the past 12 years. It also considers how the First Stage production of *Holes* in 2004 leveraged its positionality to advance discourse around controversial, social justice topics.

This study was conducted in collaboration with First Stage Children's Theatre, located in Milwaukee, WI. It was designed to understand impact between the theatre's 2004 production and its youth audiences. Consequently, it integrated various perspectives from both the theatre company and the broader Milwaukee community. Utilizing qualitative research and a case-study, this study was conducted through interviews and a group workshop with First Stage staff as well as audience members who attended the 2004 production. I also looked forward to the 2016 production in order to gauge a

comparative, longitudinal approach to understanding perceptions of change in political and social justice issues.

The results reveal how First Stage Children's Theatre positioned themselves as a prominent, cultural organization and utilized that power to craft a meaningful narrative. This study includes a multi-layered analysis that looks at both the organization's structural success as well as their approaches specifically for *Holes*. Through the story of *Holes*, First Stage was able to examine the politics of the juvenile justice system, a controversial social and political concern in Milwaukee. I argue that First Stage Children's Theatre was a space that allowed audiences to critically consider their own perceptions around the politics of race in the juvenile justice system and encouraged these audiences to be more empathetic to all participants within this system.

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Chapter One: *Introduction to the Study*

Theatre, like many art forms, has the ability to hold a mirror to society. Theatre for young audiences, a fairly recent subcategory of more traditional theatre, is still considering how to best comment on the social and political climates of the communities they serve. We are living in an era, in America, where political conversations have shifted from the dinner table to the internet. It is no longer appropriate to talk with people face-to-face, only instead through news feeds, hashtags, and 140 character tweets that we are able to create unauthentic, antagonistic, and, at times, uninformed identities behind. Politics is no longer polite in person.

Theatre, for centuries, has served as an alternative tool for communities to dissect and criticize the world around them. Audiences were invited into a space and asked to watch experiences and events enacted by real people. These audiences watched, considered and departed with perspective and, hopefully, an impetus to start a conversation with that perspective. Around the 1960s, as the political climate in America became more volatile, theatre companies became more prescriptive with their ideas and messages to audiences. These audiences were consequently disengaged because of this hostility and turned to different venues for these conversations.

Theatre for young audiences has become increasingly popular over the last 40 years. For the first time, some companies have shifted from material for adults to material geared towards youth and their families. As the artistic climate considers refocusing back to the political in the 21st century, children's theatre companies are now equally tasked

with considering how to begin social and political conversations amongst their audiences without becoming lethally prescriptive.

In 2004, First Stage Children's Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin produced an adaptation of Louis Sachar's *Holes*. The production, as described by the company, was one of the most successful productions in First Stage's history (American Theatre Editors, 2015). First Stage Children's Theatre has celebrated decades of high quality and high impact children's theatre in the Milwaukee community. This study will examine the impact First Stage had on the Milwaukee community through this production in 2004 and will look forward to examine the company's intended impacts in the 2016 production of the same story. In particular, I am concerned with how the production team and First Stage staff framed the production of *Holes* to highlight specific themes, whether or not those themes were present in dialogue surrounding the production, and how the story of *Holes*, a fantasy-based narrative, facilitated this conversation.

Sachar's (1998) nationally best-selling book pushes the boundaries of realism, naturalism, and fantasy. I will consider how the presentation of this text impacted audiences and whether the company's style of theater-based, civic education fits into the canon of political theater intended for young audiences.

This research will consider the intersection of work on political theater and theater for young audiences. By comparing the work of First Stage to both historical and current political theater practitioners, I will explore the importance of crafted meaning and heightened metaphor to more effectively reach a wider, and younger, audience.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

How did the social and political themes in First Stage Children's Theatre's 2004 production of *Holes* impact youth audiences in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? What can these impacts reveal about how theatre as an education tool stimulates conversations about community issues?

Sub Question

To what extent was First Stage's decision to re-produce *Holes* in 2016 reflective of the social and political climate in Milwaukee over the past 12 years?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Theatre has a history of encouraging society to engage in dialogue and, at times, action around social and political controversies in communities. Since the mid-1900s, however, these conversations have subsided and theatre has been criticized, over the last half-century, for being too surface-level and unintentional in its practice. Theatre, for many, is no longer essential to societies, it no longer serves communities.

In order for theatre companies to re-engage with communities in meaningful dialogue, they must thoughtfully craft narratives that ask audiences to question and criticize the world around them. Theatre for young audiences, in particular, has an even more difficult task when choosing to engage in controversial and difficult topics. When a community suffers from a tragedy, theatre should react and facilitate conversations around that tragedy, especially with youth.

If youth theatre companies are able to focus on crafting intentional narratives and become more situated and integrated in the ecosystem of communities, they may be able

to create more meaningful conversations and impacts on those community's youth regarding controversial political and social topics. These companies may be able to inspire youth to practice empathy through confronting their own autonomy and positionality in the community alongside others whose narratives they may not understand.

MOTIVATIONS FOR RESEARCH

First Stage was an integral part of my childhood, both developmentally and artistically. I attended their theatre academy as an elementary and middle school student and performed in their productions as a high school student. From the moment I became interested in theatre, my parents encouraged me, because of First Stage's prominent position in the community, to study with them.

My involvement with First Stage led me directly to pursue a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in drama, to serve as an art and theatre educator with the United States Peace Corps, and to attend graduate school and subsequently utilize them as the basis for this research. Rob Goodman, the founder of First Stage and a mentor of mine has often articulated how, when this all began over 20 years ago, he had no idea he would be standing where he is today.

First Stage Children's Theatre is one of the most reputable children's theatres in the nation. I've seldom met a theatre educator, inside or outside of Wisconsin, who does not know about the work First Stage does. However, he was also referencing the difficult times. The years of financial hardship, complications in gaining trust from the community, constant back and forth in putting together a season that "sells" and a season

that sends a message. Most theatre companies, successful theatre companies, feel those same hardships at one time or another.

Today, of the various theatre and art education organizations I have worked for, utilizing artistic practice for social justice and political discourse in the community has often been an ongoing conversation and criticism. Theatre companies and cultural institutions are often tentative to push the boundaries, or even comment on, the political, economic, or social issues that face our society. First Stage had the ability to impact my worldview in such a profound way and I am interested in researching if the community at large felt a similar impact.

I am interested in researching companies and institutions that ask real questions and spark real conversations in communities about social and political issues of controversy. In this specific study, I hope to understand what prompted First Stage to produce a story about injustices within male youth incarceration in a city that holds the highest percentage of incarcerated males. The production was, in every possible way, a mirror for the controversial issues that affect Milwaukee every day.

I am also personally motivated to explore the scope of whether or not theatre is essential anymore. In full disclosure, I am dissatisfied with how often companies shy away from impactful material and produce surface-level work that sells tickets to wealthy benefactors. As an adult, I have watched theatre become less a tool for community edification and cohesion and more a consumed product susceptible to similar capitalist antics as corrupt corporations. Theatre, such as this, is not essential, it is toxic. First Stage could prove as an example of the companies that are still working for the people and

serving communities. This research project is not a love-letter to this company, but a thoughtful and intentional look at how one organization continues to make theatre a crucial art form for youth.

SPECULATION ABOUT THIS INVESTIGATION

After collecting and reviewing my data, I believe I will find that First Stage's 2004 production of *Holes* encouraged the youth who attended the production to question and consider incarceration, specifically of men in the racial minority, and its constitutionality in the Milwaukee community. Milwaukee is re-producing *Holes* in 2016 for the first time since 2004. I believe this reinvestment in the production is partially in response to higher rates of racial segregation and incarceration in the community over the past 12 years. While I am interested in all outcomes inspired by the production, I believe the most pertinent will be the connections students made between the text and Milwaukee's social issues. I believe because First Stage is well situated in the community, these conversations will have been meaningful and substantial. I also believe their intentional choice to produce *Holes*, and the narrative devices within *Holes*, will have added to these conversations and criticisms of Milwaukee's political and social climate.

Milwaukee was in the national spotlight in connection to the national movement questioning police confidence after the fatal shooting of Dontre Hamilton. The police officer involved, like so many other cases in America, failed to be charged over the questionable event (Madhani, 2014). A 2013 study conducted by the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee found that Milwaukee leads the nation in male incarceration rates

(Link, 2013). I believe because of Milwaukee's turmoil over racial profiling and mistrust of the judicial system, First Stage Children's Theatre's decision to re-produce *Holes* in 2016 is, in part, fueled by a desire to reopen those conversations.

RESEARCH METHODS

I will study First Stage Children's Theater's 2004 production of *Holes* as a qualitative case study. A qualitative case study focuses on a particular unit or example of a particular field within reality (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2014) explains the general structure and steps of a case study. The research begins in the planning phase, moves to the design phase, and lands on the preparations phase. From there, the steps circle between preparation, collection, and analysis until enough data is collected to satisfy the study. Finally, the study is shared with a wide audience.

My data collection methods will encompass semi-structured interviews with staff and community members as well as emerging, arts-based methods for memory recollection and intentional representation. Because I am asking my participants to remember material and conversations over the past 12 years, I will implement uncommon research practices. I will also analyze any documents the organization utilized regarding educational impact. These will include lesson plans and brochures from the 2004 production. Finally, I will apply my own positionality as a past member of the First Stage community and my current role as an employee of their theatre academy as a first-hand resource for the general themes and ideas the company projects to the community.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

- First Stage Children's Theatre: Also referred to as First Stage, this youth theater company was founded in 1987 by Milwaukee native Rob Goodman. The organization is "one of the nation's most acclaimed children's theaters and the second largest theater company in Milwaukee" ("About First Stage", n.d.). They produce up to six plays every season for all ages.
- *Holes*: Holes, the book by Louis Sachar, was written in 1998 for young audiences. Because Sachar also adapted his book into a play, the themes and messages in the theater script will be considered synonymous with the original book text.
- Political Theater: In the bounds of this study, political theater is defined as theatrical stage performance that comments on or is inspired by local political or social issues.
- Theater: Theater, with the "er" ending references a physical theater space. For example, First Stage Children's Theatre produces plays at the Todd Wehr Theater.
- Theatre: Theatre, with the "re" ending, references theatre as a whole, a practice, an idea.
- Theatre for Young Audiences: Theatre for young audiences is a specific style of theatre aimed at youth age 0 - 18. This style often encompasses fantasy-based work as well as well-known, adapted books and movies. I will also reference it as "children's theater," "youth theatre," and "TYA."

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Without cited evidence, there is little doubt that First Stage's production of *Holes* reached thousands of students. While this study could benefit from interviewing and assessing impact on each youth that attended the show, for time and realistic purposes, I will be focusing my interviews on a concentrated group of individuals that attended the show in 2004.

Furthermore, I chose to limit my study to one story, *Holes*, as opposed to other plays from First Stage's history because *Holes* touches so specifically on one of the most pertinent social justice issues within the city. I was not able to compare other plays they produced to these issues as directly as I was *Holes*. I was also interested in the fact they are re-producing the show twelve years later. I believe the time between 2004 and 2016 uniquely bookends a tumultuous time in Milwaukee history.

Chapter Two: *Literature Review*

Telling stories, especially to children, is a delicate thing. Storytellers and theatre makers are tasked with the difficult job of crafting narratives that are appropriate yet provocative and imaginative yet realistic. Theatre has, and continues to be, criticized for being both shallow and surface-level as well as provoking and, at times, aggressive. When parents, teachers, or guardians bring their children to see a play, they are putting a large amount of responsibility on the theatre company to take care of the minds and emotions of those children.

In this literature review, I will begin by discussing a brief history of the controversy of politics and social topics in theatre and performance. I will explain why audiences and theatre companies alike are shying away from provocative stories and how this could have a potential negative effect on our society. I will explain the possible ways that politically and socially situated performance can positively effect audiences through civic education, creating community through the arts, and empathy and performance. I will then move onto to perspectives of the responsibility of youth theatre to focus on political and social narratives and then conclude with how fantasy stories, specifically *Holes*, could potentially affect the perceptions of young audiences.

PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS

For centuries, playwrights and theater makers have pushed the boundaries of political and social critique through performance and art. Over time, critique shifted from a direct call for audience members to quickly and effectively affect social and political change to a more general criticism on localized communities (Martin, 2006). Brecht, one of the first major political theatre makers widely studied in academia, pioneered the idea of breaking the fourth wall in order to directly address the audience. He believed that if

the actors directly spoke to the audience and made eye contact with them, then they would feel more empowered to take action and be more susceptible to the emotions emitted from the performance (Epskamp, 1989). While Brecht implemented social and political theatre in Europe in the mid 1900s, in America, the US government utilized theatre artists for pro-American political assurance by employing them through the New Deal. The government believed that by putting haphazard artists on the federal payroll, they may shy away from those same artists perpetuating anti-American sentiments and blatant government criticism (Sommer, 2014). Forty years later, in Central America, Augusto Boal furthered the pedagogy of Brecht by recognizing that not only should actors directly address the audience, they should also be involved in the process of content creation. He believed that this took all of the power away from the actor to act and think *for* the spectator, and redistributed that power so the spectator could decide and, at times, act on his or her own (Boal, 1998; Epskamp, 1989).

As Boal's political theatre model shifted to the United States, it was heavily embraced in the 1960s by anti-neoliberal and anti-consumerism advocates, particularly on the East and West coasts. McCarthyism instilled fear and silence in many political artists in the 1950s and, consequently, more hostile forms of political theater entered the cultural landscape (Bogart, 2014). Groups such as the Yippies and Bread and Puppet Theatre took civic participation in performance to mean engaging civilians, with or without their permission. They felt this sort of overtly, direct and harsh criticism in the faces of those they believed to be causing social and political oppression would effectively elicit change (Jackson, 2011; Sommer, 2014). They would, for example, throw dollar bills at members of the New York Stock Exchange to demonstrate the performative nature of those workers literally grabbing at money.

Epskamp (1989) questions this type of dramatic call-to-action and warns that if political theatre is used as “an instrument to serve the ‘revolutionary movement’, then political theatre is short-lived and has no depth” (p. 63). Martin (2006) agrees that “political theatre is born of contending forces and demands that can readily bring it into crisis. Paradoxically, the very ambitions of political theatre may hasten its demise” (p. 25). Pinter (2005) believes that politicians are not interested in truth and are, instead, interested in power. In order for society to be opened up to truth through political theatre, “sermonizing has to be avoided at all cost” (p. 2). Pinter (2005) explains that objectivity allows audiences to consider multiple truths and decide for themselves, in contrast to politicians continuously telling, or lying, to them that there is only one truth.

Furthermore, Jeff and Sandy (2015) summarize that political theatre, as established by Brecht, was constantly evolving in order to meet the needs of society and to respond in a responsible way to political or social issues. Since the late 1900s, the United States has seen a significant decrease in political theatre, especially performances similar to those in the 1960s. Whether the evolution Jeff and Sandy (2015) speak of has progressed too quickly or too separately from what audiences want or expect, modern viewers do not support political theatre with the same passion they have in the past.

Audiences today are wary of political theatre. Kushner (1997) explains that audiences often view the idea of politics as “too noisy, too bristling with elbows and arguments, too impolite” (p. 21). The rapid rise of aggressive political performance curtailed the general public from being open to this style of civic education and conversation. Brook (1968) believes that audiences have been pushed to only appreciate a “deadly theatre” where they expect poetic language, historical drama, and attractive actors to transcend them from the stress of their own lives into meaningless “problems” of non-existing characters and stories. Kushner (1997) further states that current theater-

makers now believe their audiences can not understand the implications of a political statement, and therefore shy away from the practice in the first place. Bogart (2014) counters this through the idea that audiences do not believe that performance organizations treat political issues with the attention and depth they deserve.

Presently, organizations struggle between theatre performances that sell tickets and performances that press the boundaries of political or social advocacy. Organizations often believe that putting the direct needs and interests of their audiences at the forefront of their work means extracting conversations we deem impolite at the dinner table and in public spaces, the political. I will examine three approaches to political theatre in modern practice: civic education through performance, creating community through the arts, and empathy and performance. I will consider how these effectively, or ineffectively, contribute to the continuation of Brecht's evolving call for political theatre.

By examining these various facets of politically and socially driven theatre, I will be able to situate the data collected from my case-study in correlation with effective practices of other theorists, researchers and practitioners over the past half-century. I will determine if the practices of First Stage Children's Theatre are similar or dissimilar to the ideas outlined by practitioners in the same field, and if those connections are best serving First Stage's ability to facilitate community integration and conversations around controversial political and social issues.

Civic Education

Kushner (1997) recognizes that "theatre people are guiltily aware of the need for theater to have a social, if not political, impact; we always talk about doing work that matters, that 'means something'" (p. 24). For decades, theatre makers have worried about the implications of the term 'education' in the performance space. Grotowski (1968) and

Brook (1968) warned us early on about performance moving to the “rich theater” and the “deadly theater,” which, they hypothesized, would fail to engage with critical issues in a community and only focus on surface-level spectacle. They advocated for the continuation of a “poor theater” and an “immediate theater” that strips away showmanship and focuses on social and political statements in order to put civic education at the forefront of the theater practice. By examining the cross roads of civic education and performance, I will consider how the spectator interacts with globalized, localized, and individual issues of politics within performance, and where researchers and theatre makers believe these conversations are most likely to have a successful transfer.

Human rights issues, explained by Rae (2009) as commonly summarized by the basic phrase “who did what to whom,” connects to performance theory through dramaturgical implications. When looking at peoples or communities subject to human rights violations, we often contextualize not only the affected, but also the perpetrators. When we view theatre, we are constantly considering various levels of status between the characters on stage, and what they are doing to each other in order to achieve a higher or lower status (Rae, 2009). Epskamp (1989) explains that theatre does not need to stand in the way or offer answers for development, but can essentially bring to light issues around the globe in order to function more as a form of aid. He goes on to consider how theatre can more effectively speak to affluent populations about global issues, which he resolves is achieved by listening and slowly building relationships through various resources over time instead of deciding, first, on a particular and possibly unfounded issue.

Theatre makers often shy away from writing theatre that directly touches on global issues because they believe their work will not stand in the canon against great playwrights that focus on big ideas and theories rather than specific, current events. Kushner (1997), however, criticizes this by saying that theatre must be a product of the

“urgent now” (p. 29). He believes that the idea of gaining immortality through theatrical work is undeniably self-serving and goes against what practitioners, like Brecht and Boal, believed was the primary purpose of the theater. Bogart (2014) similarly advocates for theatre that touches on the now and believes that audiences are more likely to share stories about current events with their peers and communities, citing a “pebble in the pond, a ripple effect” (p. 7).

In moving from the global to the local, theatre makers struggle with making direct observations on political or social issues within a specific community. Kushner (1997) worries that communities are beginning to lose vocabulary to discuss political issues because they are simply too afraid of offending their neighbor. These conversations are important, however, because the audience can often see barriers, and ways over those barriers, through critical observation of a piece that touches on community issues. Reason (2010) agrees that theatre makers underestimate audiences’ awareness of the worth of cultural activities and the extent to which they actively seek them out. Politically situated theatre can, ultimately, have the power to relate to civic education through encouraging good citizenship. While what we watch may make us feel uncomfortable, it can force us to consider the others in our community (Bray & Chappell, 2005). Klein (2005) is certain that there is no formula to create a production that impacts everyone. I believe this, however, is less of a problem and speaks more to the complexities of communities and artistic organization’s unique charge to address those complexities.

In work executed by Rogers and Winters (n.d.), they discovered that engaging young citizens in political issues through theatre, theatre makers can create a safe space for conversation around complex social and political issues. Kushner (1997) and Martin (2006) continuously warn, however, about the intensity of those conversations. They believe that if theater makers do not consider the ways to tell political and social stories,

audiences could continue to resent the makers for attempting to educate them instead of conversing *with* them.

Finally, considering how political theatre interacts with the individual, Kushner (1997) would argue that delicately stylized and currently situated work directs us to inwardly reflect on how we interact with the local and global communities. Further on in this review, I will look at the intersection of performance and empathy, but for now, mention Kushner's (1997), Bogart's (2014), Omasta's (2011) and Reason's (2010) beliefs that everything is political, and therefore the critical observation on ourselves to exist and act in a political world is *always* present in theatre, whether we want it to be or not. Bray and Chappell (2005) echo this sentiment and encourage theatre makers to maintain a distance between audience, actor, and, action. They believe this realm of reflexivity will deepen the audience's appreciation of various characters and create a more balanced space for self-reflection and education.

In consideration of civic education, place and accessibility must also play into the conversation along with style and political positioning. Theaters are aware of how they are physically situated in the community, specifically post-Brecht, especially when it became increasingly popular to see theatre in public or unconventional spaces. This practice showed communities that theatre can be accessible outside of the formal confines of a theater space (Epskamp, 1998). Bray and Chappell (2005) warn us, however, that bringing a performance to a different audience or even bringing different audiences together does not always mean they will be willing or interested in engaging with the material. They encourage theatre makers to not only consider their audiences, but prepare their audiences as well to partake in the theatre experience. Grotowski (1968) and Brook (1968) claim that theater *must* exist in a public space that promotes provocative conversation and action, otherwise it is ineffective as a cultural tool. This does not

necessarily mean that theatre should always be presented in a place utilized *only* by the public, but should invite a public audience in order to create a safe and diverse atmosphere.

Creating Community through the Arts

Paralleled with theater's ability to engage citizens in education, it creates multiple facets of community creation and criticism. Sommer (2014) generalizes that, "civic participation depends on creativity" (p. 125). Through Anderson (1991), we understand that humans are continuously striving to align themselves with a nation, community, or identity. For many, theatre is the mechanism which accomplishes this. Whether it is the feeling of community purely through sitting in a room with others, participating in a shared experience, or the community felt through the acceptance, or possible rejection, of a viewed work, theater has the ability to not only create these communities, but to go beyond its walls and affect geographical groups.

Because the theatre-community dialogue is facilitated first and foremost by people, change agents, and practitioners, Longo (2007) outlines the three basic traits of an effective community practitioner. She believes practitioners must be reflective (listen, learn, react), connectors (link alternative learning with political action), and utilize multiple fields of education (both formal and informal). She also upholds that the community to theatre and theatre to community connection has certain traits and restraints. Organizations must be patient and commit to integration over long periods of time. In order for theatres to be relevant to communities, they must also be relevant to the singular lives of its residents. Finally, theaters must utilize the talents of non professionals and foster equal relationships, without direct attempts to educate or change that which they do not understand.

Both inside and outside the walls of an organization, in order for political theatre to hold reverence, it must encourage, enact, and support the community. This is achieved through connecting to the outside community to create work, engaging youth in new modes of education, and encouraging autonomy through participation.

The balance between organization, community, and education is delicate. Organizations aim for independence from outside persuasion, usually disguised as the need to sever ties that may impose financial burdens. This independence, however, can close a community off to non-threatening opportunities for collaboration. Communities, on the other hand, since the political theatre movements of the late 1900s, have felt similar aversions to connecting to the oppressive and condescending nature of political theatre organizations (Boal, 1998; Epskamp, 1989; Jackson, 2011; Sommer, 2014).

Communities that option to have an open dialogue with arts organizations and hope to comment on or illicit change often gain from mutual understanding and the ability to act, react, and create immediately (Borwick, 2012). In considering Boal from the mid 1900s, organizations that encourage citizens (both theater and non-theater makers) to participate in the creation and presentation of political work facilitate a strong feeling of connection (Sommer, 2104). At the very least, Jeff (2015) postulates that theater must engage in a dialogue with the audience, even if the audience isn't involved in the content-creation.

Sommer (2014) warns us that theatre makers often create a piece of engaging or critical political theatre and believe their work is done the once the performance goes public. While it is effective to engage with the community before, theatre makers must also engage them after. This instinct mimics Longo's (2007) call for reflective community practitioners. Longo (2007) furthers this idea by stating that through constant and repetitive engagement in community discourse and participation, theatre companies

can gain trust from the community that is harbored in experiential knowledge as opposed to credentialized knowledge, which is not accepted by many for its condescending nature. Live performance is a social event, it creates a community and facilitates dialogue about issues and ideas within a community, therefore, talking about art is natural and normal (Reason, 2010).

Borwick (2012) stands true in his theory that if organizations listen to communities, the community will respond. Connecting this to political theatre, organizations must listen, respond to, and create theatre that touches on issues in the community; this, in of itself, is a form of collaboration and can facilitate community conversations.

Before we can begin to assume that communities are interested in collaborating with organizations creating political theatre, we must consider the role of citizens, specifically youth, in community action and education. Longo (2007) generalizes that “young people lack interest, trust, and knowledge about American politics, politicians, and public life” (p.8). She continues, however, that there are growing opportunities for youth to participate in public work. Sommer (2014) backs up this theory by citing that youth and students often seek public education opportunities outside of the classroom.

Both Sommer (2014) and Longo (2007) believe that organizations, and in this case political theatre organizations, can satiate this thirst by creating open and inclusive forums for students to address public concerns. Longo (2007) theorizes that, at times, youth love to learn, but can be opposed to being taught. By creating political theater that looks less to directly and condescendingly educate, and more to open the possibility for conversation around community or political issues, organizations can address this desire.

Finally, if art, which is sometimes disregarded by citizens and youth (especially theatre or performance art), touches on politics, community issues, or is connected with

what is being learned in the classroom, educators and theatre practitioners alike can utilize this connection to strengthen cross-subject understanding.

Modern citizens and youth strive for identity and community. Sometimes, they look to their community for identity, and sometimes they are caught on extreme ends of one or the other. Learning to hold autonomy while simultaneously participating in a community is an important lesson for individual citizens and community success (Anderson, 1991). Theatre creates a space where one can watch a performance as a shared experience with others and also think, feel, or criticize through their own lens. Klein (2005) wonders what happens to an audience member when everyone is laughing at something they do not think is funny or maybe do not understand. While positions of power often encourage us to react similarly to those in our surroundings, we are able to think and evaluate on an individual level (Bogart, 2014; Jeff, 2015). By considering ideas individually, and then considering them according to their community, audiences are exhibiting one of the truly unique traits of theatre (Bogart, 2014).

Freire (1969) warns artists of the problematic civic ideology that exists between the oppressed and oppressors. He concludes that, many times, the oppressed do not aim to free themselves from oppression, but aim to instead become the oppressors (Diamond, 2007). Political theatre, in this sense, can encourage those who feel oppressed to consider alternatives outside this problematic community-driven outlook. Communities exist and operate in many ways across many cultures, and political theatre can either reinforce positive mechanisms or criticize negative ones in a less-intrusive and more inclusive way than direct education. Bogart (2014) agrees that theatre can potentially be humble in outlining failures in communities. Creating free thinkers that also participate in the politics of their community aligns with Longo's (2007) assertion that people's unique

experiences create the basis of all communities. Both are equally important, and both deserve a forum for support and criticism.

Empathy and Performance

Boal (1995) explains that “theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself—see itself *in situ*: see itself seeing” (p. 13). The connections between performance and empathy are studied, discussed, and explored by many people or companies that partake in theatrical performance. Krasner (2010) and Bogart (2014) explore the overarching and hyper-specific ways that theatre interacts with empathy on a psychological and aesthetic level. Empathy is situated at the center of the conversation, for this study, on how political theatre interacts with and empowers youth audiences. Bogart states: “The capacity to see, to perceive the world through another’s eyes, to empathize, is a vital sign of a civilized culture” (p. 97). I have outlined how Kushner (1997), Bray and Chappell (2005), Growtowski (1968), and Brook (1968) continually call for attention to style in political theatre. Krasner (2010), Blank and Jensen (2005), and Bogart (2014) echo these ideas and argue empathy to be an idealistic outcome for audiences if performances are well executed.

Before observing texts in support of empathy in the theatre, it is important to note that Brecht, a major theatre practitioner I’ve covered in my literature, was highly against theatre as an agent for empathy. He believed that empathy stood in the way of logical analysis and “pollutes reason” (Krasner, 2010, p. 260). Brecht felt that empathy was utilized as a manipulative tool by theatre makers and believed empathy and reason to be opposites. Because so much of his work aimed at directing audiences to quick action, he deemed reason and critical thinking more important than raw emotion. Krasner (2010)

criticizes this line of thought, however, and even suggests that if Brecht had considered the intersection, instead of the polarization, of empathy and reason, he may have reconsidered his stance. He questions, “if spectators fail to *care* about the actions, characters, or actors, why should they be moved to act?” (p. 262). If we are supposed to act, we also must care about those actions, and in order to care about our actions, we are helping, not hindering, ourselves by tapping into empathy.

Theatre writers, makers, and academics often talk about engaging an audience in conversations with their work or the work of others. This is a confusing phrase because, usually, audiences view, instead of participate in, theatre. I believe the “conversation” is often within ourselves as we view the play, whether considering the action on stage, considering the criticism of the narrative or style, or considering how we are connected to the story and how our lives connect with those onstage. Krasner (2010) advocates for a safe space in which any citizen can experience empathy and makes a strong case for the theater. Because “empathy enlists possibilities rather than certainties” (p. 256), theatre works that are welcoming and open also encourage a similar connection.

Through Krasner (2010), we can connect that imagination, or theatre that taps into theatrical aesthetics, is crucial to the connection between theatre and empathy as it allows us to accept fiction as truth. Therefore, if we are able to accept fantastical characters, talking animals, or make-believe places, we may also be able to see ourselves within or alongside another. Krasner concludes that while audience interaction and reaction varies from person to person, the more imaginative and accessible a narrative is to multiple populations, the more people will connect, in some way, with the material.

The first step to creating an empathy-driven theatre experience is creating a space where the audience is encouraged to think outside of themselves. Any story and any character, if written and created well, should have, at some point, a connection with any

viewer. Ranging between a singular occurrence, or the whole production, the lived experiences of the audience will, most likely, connect with various characters at various times during the production (Blank & Jensen, 2005). Because children, and all humans, are implicated by the narratives that connect to their everyday lives, theatres have the responsibility to represent as many voices as possible within each narrative (Klein, 2005; Omasta; 2015). Bogart (2014) describes this as mirror neuron activity, where our brains are automatically drawn to ideas and movements we already understand. Once we recognize this with the characters onstage, we can positively and privately consider the limits of ourselves and understand that those limits may be shared by others (Krasner, 2010).

Next, we can begin to notice how our limits, in connection to others, are being affected through the action on the stage. Krasner (2010) states that we “associate rather than identify with the actor or character” (p. 268). He directly describes how if we see a character in pain, we are not also in pain, but maybe having felt a similar pain can understand the character’s suffering. When we see parts of ourselves in the characters onstage, we can recognize when they are being treated unfairly.

Blank and Jensen (2005) believe that when we begin to associate ourselves with the characters and experiences onstage, we stop viewing them as “others” and begin to share in their experiences. This, in turn, pushes away the confining idea that people who have not specifically experienced or understood our personal experiences can not have similar experiences, and that we can not accept the experiences of people who may be slightly or even extremely different from us. Diamond (2007) asserts that all people, even those we do not favor, are a part of nature and humanity, and it is the responsibility of theatre artists to accurately represent all aspects of humanity in order to reveal true understanding. Omasta (2015) researched children’s abilities to indicate “good-doers”

and “evil-doers” in stage plays, but I am interested in theatre further encouraging children to consider *why* “evil-doers” are acting on evil instincts, and, possibly, if they even deserve to be defined as evil in the first place. Diamond (2007) would agree that empathy in theatre helps children understand the complex politics behind perception.

Once we’re able to consider other’s experiences as aligning, at times, with our own, we can begin to use the tools the theatre gives us to eradicate the barrier between ourselves and those we don’t understand and, possibly, be pushed to advocate on their behalf. Krasner (2010) explains that “empathy in the theatre builds outwardly rather than drawing a line somewhere and excluding those outside of the boundary” (p. 258). Once we, first, understand that we have a connection to the characters on stage, and, second, accept their experiences or suffering, we can begin to imagine how we would position ourselves in a similar circumstance (Blank & Jensen, 2005). Krasner (2010) defines this as “potential experiences” (p. 269).

We empathize in the theatre not to achieve catharsis, but to think critically about the way character’s actions and choices have affected their ‘lives’ onstage. We can further this self-criticism by looking at how our actions in a similar situation would affect those around us either in comparison or contrast to the actions executed by the characters. Diamond (2007) believes that a critical view of how characters on stage affect each other leads a viewer to understand how his or her own actions affect those in his or her public or private life. This strengthens our connection to the characters on stage, our fellow audience members, and possibly those we interact with on a daily basis (Krasner, 2010).

Empathy in the theatre can, in its best form, encourage audiences to the type of action called on by Brecht and Boal (1995) without the direct and sometimes incriminating nature warned about by Kushner (1997) and Martin (2006). Current audiences do not want to be told what to do, they want to be given the option to expand

their minds and consider, on their own terms, the possibilities. Blake and Jensen (2005) believe that because modern audiences are so unwilling to leave their comfort zones, the ability to engage them in critical content can be difficult. Bogart (2014) agrees that a commitment to empathy requires time and cultivation. They therefore conclude that well-told narratives will induce empathy, and if the empathy is truly felt, audiences will be implicated to be involved and to act.

Political theatre has the ability to engage youth or the ability to turn them off to the possibility of true civic engagement through crossing a dangerous line. If theater companies chose to facilitate work centered on community issues, considering how their work interacts with civic education, community-integration, and empathy can place them at the forefront of successful and positive impact-based work.

Connecting to a community involves participating in the creation of that community. Once this is achieved, organizations can begin to educate or converse with these communities about political or social issues that need attention or criticism. Finally, utilizing empathy as a tool for community members, who have hopefully gained autonomy through viewing the production, citizens are encouraged to look not only at themselves or at the collective whole, but at the individual lives and experiences of their neighbors, both in and out of the theatre. In achieving this, change and mutual understanding of political issues in the community is possible.

THEATER AND STORIES FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Youth theatre, specifically as it is situated among political and social issues, stems from similar roots as the general, political theatre practice. Boal (2005) created exercises in community settings that lead participants to a performance-based analyses of their oppressed situation in society. Building on this work, current theater practitioners have

furthered these exercises with youth. Rohd (1998) explains that political theater practices in the classroom can “allow individuals to create a safe space that they may inhabit in groups and use to explore the interactions which make up their lives. It is a lab for problem solving, for seeking options, and for practicing solutions” (p. 38).

Rohd (1998) and his peers believe that practicing theater with youth takes the form of its own progressive language. They create and implement successful curriculum in classrooms and community centers with youth that encourage them to utilize theater to critically engage with their own problems, to consider their futures, and to heal from difficult pasts.

In moving outside of the classroom, however, these impacts are clear amongst participants yet unclear amongst viewers. While theater as a practice is often utilized inside the confines of a classroom, I wonder, when placed in a public forum, how the stories and interpretations affect audience members. This study with First Stage Children’s Theater aims to contribute to the lack of research in this specific cross section between political and youth theater and its lasting effect on audiences.

While the research and academia surrounding theater for young audiences demonstrates depth and breadth, for the purposes of this study, I will focus on the responsibility of youth theater companies (TYA) to produce social and political work and how the psychological impacts of fairy tales affect performance practice.

Responsibility

Omasta (2015) conducted a comprehensive, qualitative survey on whether or not organizations that specialize in theater for young audiences require and strive for the immediacy to spark change. Of the 332 respondents, 79% believed that theater for young audiences (TYA) should never shy away from political or social topics. Only three

respondents said politics should never be considered in a TYA production. Furthermore, almost 100% of respondents believe that if a TYA production uncovers controversial content, either the producing company, professional educators, or parents should be required to conduct follow-up conversations. When asked what specific issues TYA companies should address, most respondents cited issues primarily involved with social identity and oppression. Reason (2010) believes that TYA companies need to move beyond defining their legitimacy in the social and political field, because, as stated earlier, all narratives are tied up in politics whether intended or not (Bogart, 2014; Kushner, 1997; Omasta, 2011; Reason, 2010).

Klein (2005) and Omasta (2011) question whether adult stakeholders in TYA productions seek too much control over the perceptions of their youth audiences. Omasta (2011) defines this as a type of “institutional control” (p. 33). Bogart (2014) offers, as an alternative, that adults work to represent real social interactions on stage instead of interactions that directly control the perceptions of child audiences. Omasta (2011) struggles with TYA companies’ responsibility to impart social justice themes on young viewers. His research indicates that while children often take away the “message” of the play, there is still lacking data in if these messages have any sort of lasting effect. I believe this confusion lies in the time-bound nature of his research. Klein (2005), also skeptical of TYA’s ability to *truly* affect change and opinion in young people, believes that children can not comprehend the immediate effects a play has on them. The only indicator that can answer this question is looking at lasting effects over a longer period of time.

Both Reason (2011) and Klein (2005) cite that a primary outcome of theater for young audiences is knowledge and criticism of social issues. Reason’s (2011) research proves that children often attend a formal performance with the understanding that they

are attending an educational event. Children have little understanding of the direct outcome the play may have on their opinions and actions. Children, like adults, need time to perceive these outcomes. Klein (2005) and Omasta (2011) also question adult stakeholder's assumptions that children are blank slates (*tabulae rasae*) that they can fill with new information. Klein (2005) asserts that children have already had their own "full" life of lived experiences, and whatever they learn, they will inevitably connect to what they have already learned and experienced.

Reason (2011) considers the critical idea that children never choose to see a play through their own volition. They are always coerced, forced, or convinced to see a play either by their parents or by their teachers. He argues that theatre makers and researchers need to take this into account when they analyze outcomes. Omasta (2015) proved that the majority of TYA practitioners believe that teachers or parents need to facilitate outside discussion of the themes of a play, which is a result of the teacher or parent bringing the child in the first place.

One positive way TYA artists can respond to the criticisms around their responsibility is by seeing child audiences not as future, adult audiences, but as a body of citizens that have their own specific purpose to a community. Kushner (1997) encouraged theater makers to consider how their attitudes toward their audiences was reflected in the material chosen for them. Similarly, Reason (2011) encourages TYA artists to value child audiences for their deep and engaging perspectives on society. Reason (2011) and Omasta (2011) highlight how adults are constantly so surprised by the deep connections that children make to theatrical narratives. He believes they should reflect on this surprise and instead consider the complexities they are able to engage with these audiences. Omasta (2011) explains that "we get so busy in our everyday lives that we forget that we are this huge influence to this little vessel that's coming up in the world" (p. 36). Reason

(2011) agrees that “children are not the audiences of the future. Rather, they are citizens of the here and now” (p. 30).

Moving forward, I will discuss the specifics of how stories interact with children’s psychological understanding of the world. Because I have outlined, primarily through Reason (2010) and Omasta (2011), the advocacy surrounding enriched narratives for youth and children, I will now draw connections between the specifics of those narratives and how they affect young audiences. Because *Holes*, the focus of my case-study, combines a realistic story with fantasy elements, I will concentrate on the ways stories of this type affect children.

Psychological Effects of Fairy Tales

For a story truly to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality—and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future. (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 5)

Pinsent (2002) describes, “It might seem perverse to describe *Holes*, set in a bleak, inhospitable landscape in contemporary America, as a fairy tale, but it has many qualities in common with the genre and, like the traditional tales, has much to say about human nature and relationships” (p. 204). Pinsent offers an argument for *Holes* as a fairy tale and fairy tales have, reportedly, had deep psychological effects on children as they mature from childhood into adults.

Bettelheim (1976), one of the leading academics on children’s psychological connection to fairy tales, argues that the narratives and morals taught by classically structured stories are crucial to every child’s development. Bogart (2014) and Reason

(2011) draw similar conclusions to Bettelheim's theories through research. In considering *Holes* as a fairy tale, it is important to also consider if its narrative and morals are imperative to its audience.

Holes as a Fairy Tale

In assessing *Holes* as a fairy tale, Pinsent (2002) outlines specific narrative and plot mechanisms that align the story specifically as more than just a work of fiction. Pinsent's (2002) main argument is that a fairy tale is described as realism intersecting with magic, an argument also supported by Bettelheim (1976). She also connects that fairy tales often end with a sudden, joyous turn. The audience is often unsure of the character's outcome, but "good" always prevails over "evil." The final, larger theme of fairy tales she connects to *Holes* is that "Fate" and "Fortune" play a central role and are almost independent characters, even if none of the events of the story transcend reality.

Pinsent (2002) outlines a few specific examples of characters, objects, and plot constructs falling in the fairy tale realm. She explains that Stanley, as the main character, undergoes a transformation from "unfortunate" to "fortunate" throughout the course of the play. This sort of character development is present in other fairytales such as Cinderella. Louis Sachar, the author of *Holes*, mirrors this transformation with the revitalization and refilling of the Green Lake. Sachar (1998) also utilizes magic objects to decide fate and propel the narrative, such as the 'magic' onion juice, the lipstick cap, and sneakers that, like magic, fall from the sky (overhead freeway pass) and decide Stanley's fate. Bettelheim (1976) and Reason (2011) describe that children can learn, through various fairy tales, that difficult situations can be better handled with a friend. Sachar (1998) represents this through Stanley and Zero's unlikely friendship. Similar paradigms are present in fairytales, such as Hansel and Gretel.

Bettelheim (1976) explains that a main mechanism of fairy tales is that children can confront the fear that if they are not a good child, their parent may desert them, as is also seen in Hansel and Gretel. Sachar (1998) similarly outlines this fear in *Holes* by expecting Stanley to pay for a crime he did not commit, pulling him away from his family and feeling that he caused shame to his parents. Sachar (1998) also utilizes modes of symbolism through objects and characters to engage the audience in empathy and criticism. Pinsent (2002) specifically outlines the title of the play *Holes* and the themes throughout that touch on digging, standing, sitting, and hiding in holes. She connects these ideas to emptiness and a lack of understanding. She also places a huge emphasis on the character Zero. Sachar (1998) successfully wrote a character that you need very little background to understand his place in the community; he is a nothing, a zero.

In conclusion, Pinsent (2002) believes that by Sachar (1998) writing *Holes* with fairy tale mechanisms, the audience is drawn out of the realm of complete reality but is not lead into the realm of complete disbelief. Connecting this ideology to Krasner's (2010) belief that heightened reality or metaphor is the successful mode to explore empathy, *Holes* has the potential to affect the psychological and empathetic attitudes of readers. My research will explore if the production company also considered these impacts and if they were understood by their audiences.

Children and Chaos

After accepting that *Holes* is posed as a fairy tale, I will go further into how fairy tales and the narrative of *Holes* can affect the psychology of audiences. I will consider two main connecting themes of Bettelheim's (1976) work, *The Uses of Enchantment*, and if, similar to themes outlined by Pinsent (2002), they are also present in Sachar's (1998) *Holes*: the child's understanding of chaos and the child's understanding of growing up. I

will then outline Bettelheim's (1976) research and opinions on the importance of fairy tales in art and performance.

The various facets of chaos described by Bettelheim (1976) ultimately narrow down to how a child deals with the chaos and misunderstanding inside their own experience. I especially appreciated Bettelheim's attention to the importance of evil in fairy stories and how narratives have evolved in modern day to problematically exclude monsters from these stories, creating a disservice to audiences. Bettelheim (1976) makes a point that when humans say "all men are good," we are referring to the generalization of man's experience on earth, but children perceive this statement as "all men make good choices all the time in everything they do." At an early age, children understand that humans are not always good, and thus begins the conflict within them when they have evil feelings. By representing evil feelings through evil characters in fairy tales, children, at the very least, realize they are not alone in these feelings and are able to unpack what leads "good people" to perform "evil actions."

Once children accept that they will be faced with evil feelings, they can also understand that all people face difficulties and struggles in life, and having evil feelings towards those struggles is normal, but it is how we act in those situations that shape our character (Bettelheim, 1976). Bettelheim (1976) also explains that fairy tales help children understand that these struggles aren't always fair, which is only more of a reason to face them with confidence and humility. Sachar (1998) beautifully encapsulates this dilemma in *Holes* through Stanley's unfair sentence over a pair of shoes he did not steal.

Finally, once children understand that they will face struggles, and they will have both evil and confident feelings about their struggles, they will inevitably be frustrated by the idea of experiencing more than one emotion at the same time. Bettelheim (1976) explains that the fairy story is responsible to properly represent all emotions in various

characters. In *Holes*, Sachar (1998) utilizes the various personalities of inmates at Camp Green Lake to tap into how a child might deal with the dilemma of an unfair fate. He shows how different characters face this same fate, and concludes by showing the consequences of the actions and attitudes brought about by each boy at the camp.

Children and Growing Up

The adolescent characters of *Holes* share a common obstacle, which is being in an inherently “adult” situation, prison, as a youth. This poses as a successful connection to audiences who are confronting ideas of growing up and adulthood. Bettelheim (1976) explains that good fairy stories offer various opportunities for children to connect, or choose not to connect, to the material if they are not ready developmentally. Children often struggle with a “what’s next” syndrome of being a child because there is so much they do not know and so much that they know they do not know. Fairy tales can offer not only a glimpse into the future, but options on how to handle obstacles once they appear in a viewer’s life. Reason (2011) agrees that imaginary tales help children “see that the world is knowable, malleable and demands critical thinking” (p. 14).

Adult’s often question how fairy tales or fantasy stories can match stories based on reality because children will face reality but will never face the circumstances presented in stories like *Holes*. Bettelheim (1976) warns against this line of thought, outlining that because a child has not yet lived many aspects of reality, the realities of adulthood are just as fantastical to him or her as dragons, witches, talking animals, or, in the case of *Holes*, magic onion juice. Bettelheim (1976) leaves us with a thoughtful idea that “to become a man or a woman really means to stop being a child” (p. 99). The impetus we often place on the long developmental process of becoming an adult is truly generalized in the idea that children enter adulthood when they stop believing or

accepting fantasy. While a child is in the adolescent mindset, however, it is useful for storytellers to utilize modes of fantasy so they can tap into the important themes discussed by Bettelheim as well as ideas of empathy explored earlier in this review.

Fairy Tales as an Art Form

In accepting that fantasy is a valid tool to the inner psychological and outward civic education of a child, Bettelheim (1976) concludes by making a case about fairy tales as artistic constructs and stresses the importance in performing them. He is strong in his belief that fairy tales are works of art and would not have the same impact on the child if they were perceived otherwise. He ascertains that art of all kinds is viewed first and foremost on a personal level and society has accepted that a piece of art can have a different meaning for every person that views it. This correlates with his own idea that children will feel accepted in their individual viewing of a fairy story and the concept that they can achieve autonomy while still participating in a group (Jeff, 2015). Finally, he warns parents, educators, and storytellers of the dangers in overly explaining the lessons in fairy tales to the audience. He believes if a fairy story is a well crafted work, like a well crafted piece of art, it will speak, primarily, for itself. It is more important to consider which stories we choose to tell than making sure our audiences took the ideas and morals we hoped they would.

Performing Fairy Tales

Fairy tales, like *Holes*, began as works of literature. Truly, they began through spoken words between communities in a performative, but non-theatrical, atmosphere. We rely on the literature today to craft them into performances. Bettelheim (1976) encourages children to act out fairy tales so they can “feel” the reality. He similarly

advocates for stories to be told or performed *for* children so they can gain maximum understanding of how those stories interact with their own experience.

Bettelheim (1976) celebrates the fact that fairy tales have gone through so many transformations over the years. Connecting this idea to *Holes*, we can assume that a child who reads and views this story will not be confused or frustrated through the various ideas he or she is presented with, but instead can explore greater depth in the ideas that are important to him or her. Bettelheim (1976) advocates that a child or a community hear and experience a fairy tale as many times as possible. This, again, will not diminish or confuse the message, but if crafted well, will only reinforce ideas and possibilities. First Stage Children's Theatre has applied this ideology by consciously choosing to produce *Holes* in 2004 soon after the book and movie were released. They continue to support this by re-producing the play in 2016 in order to reinforce old themes for a society struggling with new challenges.

CONCLUSION

Theater for young audiences can have a mixed reputation because it doesn't fully live in one aesthetic world (Reason, 2011). Adults tend to disregard children's theatre because of its uneducated and surface-level nature. Reason (2011) and Kushner (1997) encourage adults to consider if this attitude is a reflection of theater, or a reflection of one's own opinion on children and audiences in general.

I began this literature review by offering a brief overview of the history of political and socially situated theatre. I discussed both supportive and dissenting perspectives on how social and political themes are uncovered in performative work today. I discussed various mechanisms, from the global to the individual, of how theatre has the potential to affect audiences. I considered, more specifically, theatre-makers

responsibility to touch on the political and the social with theatre for young audiences. I concluded that section by discussing theatre's connection to empathy in younger audiences. I further outlined how specific narratives, like fairy tales and fantasy, have a greater effect on the psychological outcome of children later in life. I connected these ideas to specific examples in *Holes* as outlined by Pinsent (2002).

Returning to Pinsent's (2002) observation, *Holes* falls completely within the realm of realism but is enhanced through fantasy due to its fairy tale mechanisms. We can assume, then, that in presenting *Holes* as a theatre piece, and embracing the fantasy elements, audience members are encouraged to look more closely at the themes and morals situated in the text. Similarly, if First Stage utilized the various mechanisms outlined in this chapter for community integration and meaningful storytelling, the probability that *Holes* will have affected audiences in 2004 is higher than if they had not prescribed to these philosophies.

Moving forward, in Chapter 3 I will discuss the specific ways I designed and implemented my study. I will begin with qualitative research and move to the particulars within each method I employed. My study was designed in order to measure First Stage and their production of *Holes* in line with the principles and values defined in this chapter.

Chapter Three: *Methodology*

As I designed my methods of research for this study, I was struck by how similar the common goals are between a researcher and an artist. Both work to examine one aspect of the human or social condition. Both calculate their own bias into the process. Both take on a responsibility to their participants and their subjects to represent their stories and emotions with ethics and humility. Both are, in a way, storytellers.

As I began reading about various research practices in qualitative research, I quickly concluded that I would move beyond the more traditional methods of case-study research. In this chapter, I will begin with a brief overview of qualitative research. I will then consider both qualitative research specifically in theatre and through a critical, cultural studies theoretical framework. Then, I will briefly overview the mechanism of a case study and then move into case studies and performance and why I chose First Stage as the location for this specific study.

From there I will outline my methods and introduce my participants, both from First Stage and from the Milwaukee community. I will highlight secondary methods I included in my study and conclude with final opinions on research positionality.

In this chapter, I focus heavily on researcher positionality. As a self-identified member of the First Stage community, I understand the potential for bias. Therefore, I focused on connecting my choices in research design to intentionality and correlated these choices to theory in past and present researchers and practitioners.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research, first implemented by social scientists, studies the way humans live their lives in both in-depth and situated contexts. Qualitative researchers aim to represent a natural reality that is independent of an objective reality, which many

researchers believe is never truly captured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Through the process of qualitative inquiry, the observer is present inside the world of the research, not necessarily separate from it. This furthers the observer's ability to seek a subjective understanding, or, as Kobayashi (2001) explains, the ability to achieve "an unspecified and uncritical 'truth'" (p. 58). In shifting from the more pragmatic and linear ideology surrounding quantitative research, qualitative research looks at a performance or event holistically, specifically, and critically (Alasuutari, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Limb & Dwyer, 2001). Qualitative researchers draw from a vast array of methods and interpretive practices in order to offer "rich" or "thick" descriptions. These descriptions can then offer insights and conclusions into lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Qualitative research is not without criticism. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) look at how qualitative research is often discounted in the scientific realm as being too exploratory and too subjective. They counter this idea, however, by explaining that qualitative research has never and does not currently aim to be objective or scientific. Qualitative research should be embraced not only for its depth on situated experiences, but also for how it has questioned the perception of the constructed reality. Qualitative research does not have to be at odds with quantitative research, instead it should be perceived as as a parallel concept (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Emerging theorists and practitioners have further challenged the idea of uncovering a universal truth or generalizable theories through qualitative research. Smith (2001) poses that the world is not only perceived differently by everyone but also experienced differently by each participant. Participants in research and researchers alike employ strategies that may accurately represent the world or multiple worlds we live in. As researchers, we must be mindful that all experiences have both expected and unexpected outcomes, and in order to utilize qualitative inquiry in an ethical way, we

should consider that our research may represent not one, but multiple truths (Alasuutari, 1996; Smith, 2001).

For my study, I have considered the ideology of ethnomethodology, described by Gubrium and Holstein (2003) as a way for researchers to consider the methods participants employ in their lived experiences to create a social reality. Similar to Smith's (2001) "qualitative pragmatism", the researcher moves beyond narrative inquiry and participant's understanding of social construction through their own spoken perceptions and tries to contextualize those perceptions through what the participants *do*. Ethnomethodology also encourages researchers to look realistically at what is being represented and not judge the participant's constructed reality as narrow or misinformed (Alasuutari, 1996). Smith (2001) believes that researchers can uncover information not only in the actions but also in the non-actions of research participants. As I move forward with my research design, this ideology becomes increasingly important in researching theatre, which encourages action from the audience as well as conversation analysis.

Qualitative Research and Theatre

As the field of qualitative inquiry grows and expands, so do the general theories and methodologies utilized within it. Because I am studying the effects of a social and cultural experience through theater, I am interested in emerging practices and theories in qualitative research within the theatrical paradigm. The framework of qualitative theatre research is concerned, for the most part, with the "liveness" of theater and how that affects and shapes viewer's perceptions of their world (Kershaw & Nicolson, 2011). Kershaw and Nicholson (2011) urge qualitative theatre researchers to consider new, constructed and critical methodologies in their research in order to shape a more appropriate discourse for representation. Because theatre as a practice has drifted so

dramatically from its original form, the ways in which we research these practices must also be re-assessed and possibly employed in an unconventional fashion. Reason (2006) argues that researchers have done very little to define theatre research from other fields. He believes we have consistently applied antiquated research techniques to the progressive theatre field and therefore are failing to represent our studies holistically. Reason (2006) encourages researchers to give more power to the participants and include them in not only the data gathering, but also the analysis of their own experiences. These ideas will be further discussed in my research design.

Both Denzin and Lincoln (2003) as well as Limb and Dwyer (2001) recognize that qualitative research is not only a holistic representation of an event, performance, or phenomenon, but is undeniably tied up in politics and social agendas. Limb and Dwyer (2001) even go so far to say that the mere act of choosing qualitative research from a critical framework is a political choice in and of itself. They believe those that look at research critically must ultimately make a choice about which voices to represent, and are, therefore, unable to represent all truths. This theory is mimicked by Smith (2001) who explains that each reality we represent “testifies to the power relations, struggles and negotiations that allow a particular version and visions of the world” (p. 25).

Qualitative Research and Critical Cultural Studies

Through the theoretical framework of critical cultural studies, my qualitative study on First Stage will look at the responsibility of theater as a social tool to facilitate youth’s consideration of their “place” in society and, in turn, their responsibility as citizens. My goal in this research is to outline how theatre can utilize critical narratives to evoke meaningful considerations amongst young audiences. I will assess their abilities, after viewing a production, to consider the inherent struggles, differences and, eventually,

connections between them and their fellow community members. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explain that through a critical cultural studies lens, the researcher must consider various aspects of social identifiers such as race, gender and social class. Alaasuutari (1996) goes on to agree that through a cultural studies framework, the researcher is able to draw conclusions on the defined community and can stray from the burden of creating a generalized and universal theory about art's applicability to the community. Because Milwaukee is currently struggling with the cultural "identifiers" critical researchers focus on, this paradigm will be beneficial to my study.

CASE STUDY

For my study, I chose to utilize a qualitative case study methodology, focusing on an embedded single-case design. Stake (2003) defines a case study as "researchers spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising meanings of what is going on" (p. 150). Yin (1994; 2003), Merriam (1998), Hamel and Dufour (1993), and Stake (2003) all have similar descriptions of the case study as a function of qualitative research. The primary unit of study in the case study is the case, whether an event, performance, individual, group, organization, or other observable entity. For my research, I will be focusing on the 2004 and 2016 productions of First Stage Children's Theater's *Holes*. Merriam (1998) argues that a case study focuses on "holistic description and explanation" (p. 29) in order to draw conclusions about the local impact or even a broader educational phenomenon. Because my research is contingent on "how" a theatrical event has shaped perceptions and actions of viewers within a larger community, Yin (2003) would agree that a case study is the best method in order to understand the production's intersection within a real-life context. Both Yin (2003) and Hamel and Dufour (1993) agree that a qualitative case

study can ethically and successfully utilize quantitative methods, as long as data is triangulated with in-depth and holistic findings.

Theorists Yin (1994; 2003) and Merriam (1998) conclude that a case study should be implemented when the researcher can ground a theory prior to research and use the case to either “prove” or “disprove” the pre-existing theory. Stake (2003) questions this ideology and feels that the uncomfortable nature of generalizing creates an ethical tension for the researcher. According to Yin (2003), it is important to develop a theory at the beginning of the research process in order to look at the intersection of “organizational theories and societal theories” (p. 31). He further argues that this encourages ethical analysis from the researcher in case the study elicits contrary findings to what was anticipated. This “analytic generalization,” Yin (2003) believes, will lead to “replication logic,” which means that if a researcher were to utilize my research design on the same case, they would find the same results. If I consider this theory critically, however, through ethnomethodology, I believe that creating a theory prior to my research could diminish the subjective perceptions of my participants. Because I believe that each reality is constructed within the bounds of a specific experience, as supported by Limb and Dwyer (2001), Smith (2001), and Alasuuturi (1996), it seems irresponsible for me to attempt to compare my participant’s perceptions to a previous experience or constructed theory. Instead, I will utilize the case study not to prove, disprove, or create a theory, but to understand the naturalized perceptions of my subject’s reaction to *Holes* and how these perceptions have influenced their conversations and actions within the bounds of the Milwaukee community and, more specifically, within First Stage.

Case Study and Performance

Stake (2003) makes a case for performance and oral tradition as a valid cultural representation. In researching *Holes*, I am not only looking at the production's impact on viewers, but on how the production itself is a reaction of the the social and political atmosphere of the community. To reiterate, my research questions are: How did the social and political themes in First Stage Children's Theatre's 2004 production of *Holes* impact youth audiences in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? What can these impacts reveal about how theatre as an education tool stimulates conversations about community issues? My sub-question is: To what extent was First Stage's decision to re-produce *Holes* in 2016 reflective of the social and political climate in Milwaukee over the past 12 years? Not only does the production have a top-down effect on viewers, but my case study looks at whether or not the impact the production had on viewers in 2004 caused a heightened awareness of the social and political inequality in Milwaukee, therefore causing increased dialogue and action surrounding these inequalities and prompting First Stage to respond by re-producing the production in 2016. While performance and oral history are valid cultural representations, they are not singular in the power-dynamic of a community, and should respond to the voices and actions of community members (Boal, 1998; Epskamp, 1989; Jackson, 2011; Kushner, 1997; Rohd, 1998; Sommer 2014).

Merriam (1998) outlines numerous functions of a descriptive case study, the most pertinent to my study is that it can "show the influence of the passage of time on an issue" (p. 30). This will allow me to be mindful of the heuristic outcome of First Stage's influence and responsiveness to the community. Yin (2003) and Merriam (1998) suggest that researchers position themselves as close to the case as possible. This has prompted me to explore alternative methods within my case study from the standard interview and

observation tactics utilized by more traditional case study researchers. I will explain these methods further in my research design.

I used the general methodology of an embedded single-case design at First Stage in order to analyze multiple components within the larger case. By focusing on both the production team and the affected population of viewers, I was able to ground my findings between the cyclical process of cause and effect between company and community. As I stated before, I am interested primarily in the effects the 2004 production had on the participant's perceptions of social and political controversy, but also if this heightened perception then caused increased conversation in the community, and eventually led, in part, to First Stage's decision to re-produce *Holes* in 2016. *Holes* is a unique case because the 2004 and 2016 productions sit on opposite ends of a period in Milwaukee's history highlighting heightened social and political tensions around men in the judicial system, a theme mirrored in the play. My case is partially longitudinal because it looks at impact and effects over a 12-year period (Merriam, 1998). Responding to Klein's (2005) criticism that most TYA research is irresponsibly conclusive due to its immediate nature, a longitudinal study could more responsibly consider deeper, more meaningful impact as adults are able to think more critically about their pasts.

First Stage and Location

Since the early 1990s, I have identified as a member of both the Milwaukee and First Stage communities. The impact that both of these "locations" had and continues to have on my perceptions and experiences is substantial. Because of the particularities of the case, outlined above for its longitudinal and unique traits, I felt well positioned as a researcher to utilize First Stage for my research. In the summer of 2015, I attended the American Association for Theater Education national conference hosted by First Stage

and Milwaukee. At this conference, I witnessed educators and theater-makers from all over the nation learn from the unique and powerful influence that First Stage has had not only on the communities in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, but on the field of youth theater as a whole. I felt a sense of pride, as a member of the First Stage community, as well as justified, as a researcher, for studying this particular company.

To summarize, Alasuutari (1996) explains that a case study is most successful when dealing with the local, and if we can look at how a specific location or case affects and is affected by its locality, we can more ethically draw conclusions and theories about cultural studies. He explains a successful critical, cultural studies case as an hourglass, where the researcher looks at one phenomenon, then how that phenomenon affects a group, community, or situation, and then circles back to implications that the case represents about the aforementioned phenomenon. For my study, I focused first on First Stage's 2004 production of *Holes*, then looked at how a specific group of viewers processed and acted on the themes of the production over a 12-year period, and then circled back to whether or not First Stage's decision to re-produce the play in 2016 was, in part, a reaction to those perceptions and actions. I will also consider how the 2004 production affected young audiences' perceptions of race and judicial oppression in Milwaukee and how those perceptions relate to the political and social climate, at large, today.

METHODS

I used multiple methods of data collection for my embedded single-unit case study. I used these various methods in order to best represent the experiences and perceptions of my participants. I began by interviewing four members of the production team from both the 2004 and 2016 production of *Holes*. Then, I interviewed 11 members

of the Milwaukee community. Eight of these community members saw the 2004 production of *Holes*. Out of the other three interviews, two community members work for First Stage as adults and have interacted with the educational content from the show. The final interview was with a community member who has seen First Stage shows in the past and is a prominent member of the artistic and cultural community in Milwaukee. I will explain my process for choosing these community members later on, but they represented a broad span of Milwaukee that interacted, in some way, with *Holes* either in 2004 or in 2016. For my second data collection and analysis chapter, Chapter 5, I only utilized the eight community members that saw the production in 2004. All community participants identified as “youth” in 2004, but are now adults that either live in or frequently visit the Milwaukee area. Finally, I conducted research with a focus group of four individuals from the eight participants that saw the production in 2004. I used a mixture of group conversations, memory exercises, and visual-based instruction to best understand their perceptions of the themes in *Holes* over the 12-year span between the productions. I chose to only interview 4 individuals after considering Valentine’s (2001) focus on the “richness of your encounters” in qualitative research (p. 46). Valentine (2001) further explains this tactic as a characteristic of qualitative research as opposed to the random sampling utilized in quantitative research. Although I did use quantitative-like data collection for a small part of my case, I was most interested in the perceptions constructed by individuals who saw the show both in 2004 and 2016, and therefore kept my focus group small to achieve depth in analysis. I supplemented this data collection with secondary texts produced by First Stage’s education department for both the 2004 and 2016 productions.

Interviews with First Stage Staff

I conducted semi-structured interviews with First Stage staff involved in both the 2004 and 2016 productions of *Holes*. I was mindful of the unique power dynamic between myself and the staff I interviewed. I conducted my interviews in the summer of 2015, a time during which I was also employed by First Stage's partnering Theatre Academy. All of the staff I interviewed were people I have known since I was involved with First Stage in the 1990s as a youth. Many of the staff, Rob Goodman (founder of First Stage) in particular, were not only my bosses, theatrical collaborators, mentors, and role models, but close friends to both myself and my family. While this initially seemed like a problematic construct, Skelton (2001), Kobayashi (2001), and Smith (2001) helped me realize that my close position to these participants could be an affirmative attribute to the study. They argue that the closer the researcher is involved in the case, the more honest he or she is about positionality in the lives of those researched. By accepting that I am a co-creator of the uncovered knowledge, the more ethical I am able to analyze and represent my findings. Aitken (2001) questions if a researcher can truly give up power in order to listen to the expertise of the interviewed. I believe because, for the majority of my life, I have been impacted by the expertise of the staff of First Stage, I was able to sincerely accept their interviews as insight and am conscious of my objective knowledge. Therefore, the knowledge uncovered during the interviews with First Stage staff is situated within my positionality. I've outlined more information about the staff I interviewed below.

Name	Position	Significance to Study
Rob Goodman	Artistic Director during 2004 production and Founder of First Stage Children's Theater	Rob Goodman has had a significant impact on the direction of the company and each show's connection to the Milwaukee community. His position not only within the company but within the city of Milwaukee was imperative to my data collection. His interview spoke more to overarching themes and goals of the company.
Jeff Frank	Stage Director of 2004 and 2016 productions of <i>Holes</i> , current Artistic Director	Jeff Frank, similar to Rob Goodman, had and continues to have a significant impact on the company and the company's connection to the Milwaukee community. His interview outlined more specific ideas and themes in <i>Holes</i> .
Julia Magnasco	Current Education Director	Julia Magnasco worked under the mentorship of past Education Director to create one of the leading education programs in a theater company in the country. The work her and her office do is directed towards how each production is presented and perceived by youth, specifically schools, in the community.
Sherri Williams Pannell	Dramaturg of 2016 production of <i>Holes</i> , performer in 2004 production of <i>Holes</i>	Sherri Williams has a unique view of this case because of her positions in both the 2004 and 2016 production. As a dramaturg, she worked on connecting the ideas and themes of the play with not only youth in the community, but to those affected by political and social injustice throughout Milwaukee.

Table 1: First Stage Staff Information

I asked similar questions in my semi-structured interviews amongst all staff, with minor changes and differences depending on their title and position in the company. I focused on why the company chose the story of *Holes*, what themes they felt the story would connect to the lives and experiences of the audience, and how they felt these

themes did (2004 production) or would (2016 production) inspire questions and actions from the viewers. I asked them to reflect on both specific and general examples of the importance of *Holes* in the Milwaukee community. The interview questions for each staff are listed in the following appendices:

- Artistic and Stage Director Jeff Frank: Appendix A
- Education Director Julia Magnasco: Appendix B
- Dramaturg Sheri Williams Pannell: Appendix C
- Founder Rob Goodman: Appendix D

Each interview lasted about 45 minutes and was conducted in the offices or meeting space at First Stage. Each participant gave consent for both the interview and the use of their names. I informed them that they could, at any time, rescind their views and opinions from the study.

Interviews with Community Participants and Memory Collection Workshop

After researching various theories on the ethics of representation and the bridge between a conscious and unconscious constructions of reality, I searched for new and emerging methods that would best produce representation for my research with past audience members. Smith (2001) believes that the conscious and the unconscious are parallel in the construction of what is “known.” I felt it would be a misrepresentation to only analyze my participant’s interviews about what they perceived from the 2004 production, so I looked to Heron and Reason’s (1997) participatory inquiry paradigm. This idea states that the researcher and participants should not only use narrative but praxis to co-create the perceptions and analysis of their constructed reality of a situation, event, or performance. In other words, I was interested in interviews as well as activities and group discussions that would connect me with the participants to help them more fully consider their perceptions, and therefore, better support my analysis. For this, I

looked to studies conducted by Reason (2006) and Kershaw (2011) that utilized emerging methods for theatre research and audience perception.

I began by conducting individual interviews with eleven participants that spanned varying levels of participation with First Stage. These participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities because many of the questions and subjects that emerged during our interviews were controversial. By informing them that their identities would be kept confidential, they were able to talk more openly on these controversial topics. General information about my participants is charted below:

Pseudonym	Gender	Attended <i>Holes</i> in 2004	Worked with <i>Holes</i> curriculum	Participated in group workshop
Ivy	Female	X		X
Kenneth	Male	X		X
Eleanor	Female	X		X
Maya	Female	X	X	X
Nadia	Female	X		
Abby	Female	X		
Ellen	Female	X		
Emma	Female	X		
Sam	Male		X	
Lee	Male		X	
Ian	Male			

Table 2: Community Participant Information

The diversity of participation amongst my research subjects was an intentional and calculated choice. Ian, the only participant that had no direct interaction with *Holes*, and was never employed by First Stage, is an artistic and cultural facet of the Milwaukee community and attributed his memories of *Holes* in 2004 to conversations amongst his peers in school. Lee and Sam are both employed, or have been recently employed, by First Stage and similarly remember conversations around *Holes* from 2004 even though they did not personally attend the production. These three interviews were crucial for data and analysis surrounding First Stage's impact and integration on the Milwaukee community as a whole, which will be explored further in Chapter 4. Data from my interviews with the remaining eight participants was utilized in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

After these interviews, I chose four participants from the eight that saw *Holes* in 2004 to conduct a memory workshop. Reason (2006) expressed the importance of “first alone, then together” in order to encourage autonomy in memory recall. If the participants had first been interviewed together, they may have collectively decided on a false memory because of their peers. These interviews also helped me, as the researcher, to have a more comprehensive understanding of what the participants consciously remembered from the 2004 production as opposed to what still needed uncovering. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Interview questions for the community participants that were not involved in the memory workshop can be found in Appendix E. If one of the participants did not attend *Holes* in 2004, questions specific to *Holes* were omitted. Interview questions for the community participants that were involved in the memory workshop can be found in Appendix F.

After the interviews, I brought the four participants together for a workshop that utilized new methods in case study methodology. These methods considered the

intersection of research and praxis as well as worked towards a truer memory recall from 2004. Kershaw (2011) advocates for praxis in research because it “fashions freshly critical interactions between current epistemologies and ontologies” (p. 64). Reason (2006) explains that researchers should look for homogeneity among participants, but because I’m considering my participants as a singular representation of the Milwaukee youth community and seeking First Stage’s implications and effects on general youth community, I ascribe to Alasuutari’s (1996) hourglass approach, which encouraged me to find participants with diverse backgrounds. Reason (2006) adds that a tactic of an unconventional approach is to engage the researched as researchers themselves. I believe this addressed positions of power between myself and the participants and allowed them to embrace ownership over the construction of their knowledge and perceptions within the case. As the researcher, I was carefully conscious of working with, but not guiding, the understood perceptions of my participants.

I drew from Reason’s (2006) research design on memory recall with youth audiences. Because my participants are now adults, I adjusted my methods and activities slightly. I began with a bridge activity, as Rohd (1997) would describe, to get participants thinking about memory recall and comfortable with sharing in front of each other. This exercise prompted the participants to visually mark on a scale their participation and interaction with *Holes*, First Stage, and art-making.

In the second part of the workshop, I led the participants through a simple memory recall activity. I chose this method instead of asking them to open-endedly verbalize their memories from the 2004 production for two reasons. First, when I asked people to participate in this study, the overwhelming response was that they remembered absolutely nothing about seeing the 2004 production of *Holes*. Especially after a pre-interview with one participant, Maya, a few very simple questions uncovered a

significant amount of memories from her perceptions from the show. Reason (2006) agrees with this tactfulness in memory recall, stating that keeping it too open requires a large amount of guidance and prompting, which would have been counterproductive to my inductive ideology. The second reason was because, after considering ethnomethodology, I knew that if I drew my conclusions only from a formal spoken response, I would be imposing a possibly misrepresented account from their own analysis and could end up further from a true representation than I deemed responsible. Therefore, I created a situation where they would be the primary constructors, reporters, and analyzers of their own experience in the research process. The workshop consisted of mindful memory recall activities and visual, poster activities centered on group-work and a follow up discussion.

Reason (2006) explains that a theatrical performance can not solely be explained as the action on the stage but must also include how the audience members perceive the action on the stage. I measured the intersection of intent and impact from First Stage through the memories, perceptions, and actions of my participants. The final step of data collection from the participants was to bring them back to the 2016 production of *Holes*. My hope was that they would reflect on how the themes in the play can be connected to the Milwaukee community, presently.

Secondary Texts and Surveys

The third method in my research design was the use of secondary texts pre-created by the education department at First Stage. Gale and Featherstone (2011) advocate for a more creative collection and analysis of theater “texts” beyond just the script. Equating this to archive research, by utilizing various “texts” we can “renegotiate their position in a hierarchy and, like a detective, make our clues mean something” (p.

29). Similar to my apprehension at purely using narrative inquiry with the audience participants, utilizing secondary texts and surveys by the company served as supporting data to their own perceptions and understanding of the show. I looked at educational lesson plans that the 2004 and 2016 education team used in workshops with elementary school students. Kershaw (2011) advocates for the spiraling or cyclical nature of qualitative research, especially within the arts and theatre practice. By looking at data situated on representation from 2004 both in comparison and in parallel to data situated on representation from 2016, I am satisfying this aspect of the methodology.

Participant-Observer and Researcher Positionality

I mentioned before that my relationship to First Stage had depth before my decision to utilize them in my case study. Instead of focusing on how to blind this undeniable bias, I looked at how to embrace it in participation as a researcher. I “participated” with First Stage as an academy student and professional young performer from 1998 to 2003. I kept in touch regularly with staff, actors, and students between 2003 and 2015. In 2015 I was hired as a lead teacher for the academy. At first, I was determined to separate my time as a teacher from my research, but after reading about the importance of the researcher positioning his or herself as close to the experience and observation process as possible, I decided to use my time as a teacher, which was also the time the education department was preparing for the 2016 production of *Holes*, as a participant-observation period. I then utilized this “participant-observer data” when creating interview questions for the staff. Hamel and Dufour (1993) define a participant observer as someone who gradually integrates themselves into the “local population” or situated community of study. Yin (2003) agrees that the participant observer is “somewhat” positioned in the organization.

The advantage of my role as a participant observer was that I could more realistically represent the experiences of all participants because I was so close to the lens of the company. Gubrium and Holstein (2003) encourage researchers to look at the “hows” and “whats” of social construction and how that construction is inevitably influenced by outside powers. They go on to explain that a researcher must temporarily suspend their ontological beliefs so that they can truly understand the constructed perceptions of their participants in the “now”. I believe that by situating myself as a semi-participant, I was able to suspend my ontological beliefs during data collection and prior to analysis.

Smith (2001) concludes that by being as closely aligned with the participants, environment, and research scope as possible, researchers are much more likely to ethically represent the experiences and perceptions of their subjects. I was continuously mindful of my reflexivity as a researcher which Kobayashi (2001) advocates for in order for me, as the researcher, to “examine [my] own motives, and the effects of [my] actions” (p. 55).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

As a graduate student and educator, I have consistently been aware and in search of emerging practices to teaching and research. I’m conscious of my desire to stray from normative practices so it seemed natural for me to look for alternative methods in my thesis research. I believe that while more traditional, narrative methods for data collection can be effective, because the field of research is evolving to uncover more voices, practices in methods should evolve as well. I made a comparison earlier on to the similarity between researchers and artists wanting to create ethical and responsible

representations of humanity. As an artist interested in experimenting with new artistic methods, I am similarly interested in this experimentation within research as well.

My data analysis consisted of me transcribing all interviews and the recordings of the workshop. I then coded patterns connected to my research questions. I first read through all the transcripts to look for overarching themes in connection with location and integration and the importance of fantasy and open narratives. Then, I re-read the transcripts and highlighted supporting quotes and information that fell into these two categories. From there, I combined this information according to theme and looked for corresponding perceptions. I supported this by also coding the secondary texts. Through these patterns, I was able to draw conclusions on the constructed perceptions of the participants in response to the 2004 production of *Holes*, and how First Stage utilized its position within the community to leverage those conversations and perceptions. I also considered whether or not the theatre company re-producing the play in 2016 was at all a cyclical reaction to the participant's reactions as representatives of the Milwaukee community.

I was moved by Skelton's (2011) call for researchers to truly look at the complexities of their participants and work to represent them as irreproachably as possible. I care, very deeply, about the staff, students, and audience members at First Stage. I believe this stems from my relationship to the company for the majority of my life. As I stated earlier, this could be interpreted as problematic in my bias as a researcher, but instead I welcomed this as a responsibility to the company and to my subjects to represent them as realistically as possible. In being true to my unconventional practices as a researcher, and the consequential significant responsibility, utilizing alternative research methods within the case study methodology seemed to lead to the

most sincere and honest examination of First Stage's 2004 and 2016 productions of *Holes*.

Chapter Four: *First Stage Strategies for Community Engagement*

Before delving into the specific themes and ideas that Milwaukee audiences connected with in *Holes*, I will discuss how First Stage utilized *Holes* to promote dialogue around social and political issues in Milwaukee by establishing itself as a prominent cultural leader in the community. In this chapter, I will outline the data around First Stage's community engagement and the various ways First Stage has leveraged its placement in the community to build trust in order to breach sensitive social and political issues.

I will begin by outlining a brief history of First Stage. I will then describe data I collected from both the First Stage adult staff followed by the community participants. At times, I will refer to those participants as "youth participants" because I often ask them to reflect on their experiences with First Stage as youth. As noted in Chapter Three, these "youth participants" were adults when I interviewed them in 2016.

In interviews with the First Stage staff, I have coded data for this section into two general themes. The first is how the staff perceive youth theatre, *all* youth theatre, to interact with communities, *all* communities. Then I narrowed that down to how the staff saw the work at First Stage contributing to the Milwaukee community.

In interviews with the community and youth participants, I coded data into two slightly different themes. I outlined their views on their personal experiences with First Stage as youths as well, at times, as adults. I then outlined their perceptions of how their relationships with First Stage affected their views on political and social topics, in general.

I conclude this chapter with a correlation and analysis of this data between the adult staff and community participants. I argue that because First Stage cultivates

meaningful relationships with their audiences over many years, engages in age appropriate casting, and is situated as a space for diversity, they were able to foster critical examinations around these perceptions.

FIRST STAGE CHILDREN'S THEATRE

First Stage Children's Theatre was founded in 1987 by Rob Goodman. Rob was working at a local professional theatre and had the opportunity to start a new company focusing solely on children, youth, and families. His goal was to create a theatre that connected to all ages yet still professional and inspirational in its content. While this was Rob's first journey into children's theatre, he noted that the vision of First Stage quickly came together. From the beginning, he stated, First Stage would not produce art for art's sake. They would be focused first and foremost on child development and community engagement.

Since 1987, First Stage has moved from renting spaces throughout Milwaukee for their productions, rehearsals, and academy to their own space in a central area of downtown. The Milwaukee Youth Arts Center is the home of First Stage, The Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra, and Danceworks. All of these organizations call the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center their brick and mortar home and they all engage young people and the community in performative arts. First Stage still utilizes the Todd Wehr Theatre for their productions, a 500-seat theatre in the Marcus Performing Arts Center.

By moving from their various community locations to a central location, they became more centralized, but possibly less present in the community. Over the last few years they have worked to re-expand their presence in the community and now operate various satellite campuses for their academy. They see this geographical range as an advantage to their community engagement. They work in communities blocks and

minutes away as well as towns and hours away. Each year they build on their programming and work to become community minded not only in mission but in actual presence as well.

First Stage produces six main stage productions each year in the Todd Wehr theatre. They are a compilation of adapted children's novels, musicals, youth scripts, and new work productions. These six productions consciously serve students of all ages and from all backgrounds. First Stage Children's Theatre is also host to First Stage Theatre Academy. The academy, like the theatre, focuses on "life skills through stage skills." They host various camps, classes and workshops throughout the summer and the year. These programs sometimes correspond to the main stage shows and sometimes they are singular in their instruction.

First Stage is the second largest children's theater in the United States. They employ artists, educators, and non-professionals from the Milwaukee community. They hosted the American Association for Theatre Educators National Conference in 2015 where they were recognized as an organization pioneering theatre for young audiences and education in the arts.

THEATRE AND ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITIES

When I sat down with First Stage's staff, both present and past, they emphasized the foundation on which theatre exists not only in the Milwaukee community, but in communities as a whole. While many children and youth have been viewing all forms of theatre since its creation, not until recent decades has "theatre for young audiences" become a crafted and constructed facet of the arts world. All of the staff members at First Stage believe that theatre is essential to communities and children within those communities. Rob furthered this by stating, in turn, "theatre does not exist without

community.” The staff agreed that theatre and its community must continue a cyclical conversation on issues pertinent to children as the key to attending to them.

The question that persisted for me was: why theatre? Why is *theatre* essential for young people and how does it affect their political and social perceptions? Sheri believes, “through the arts, we have a vehicle to open up discussion.” She touched on the idea that often, in communities suffering oppression, there is no forum or vehicle for the issues. It is not a topic of conversation in the home or the school; it is not polite. You don’t talk about politics at the dinner table. In an attempt to include all children of different backgrounds, the staff at First Stage believes in plays that connect with “universality.” Rob believes a universal play can connect with diverse audiences and allow all viewers to appreciate it in different ways.

The staff believes the key to universality in theatre can be attributed to whether or not a play is prescriptive. All staff mentioned that when a piece of theatre tells its audience how to act or how to think, it is less successful than if a play encourages the audience to ask open-ended questions. Both Jeff and Julia advocate for children to leave the theatre and return home or to the classroom and ask “how could that have happened and how can we keep something like that from happening again?” in response to theatre that touches on community issues. Rob echoes that youth want plays with issues, “they want plays that deal with things that are important in their life, things they encounter.” As the founder and artistic director of the company since the 1980s, he has observed that plays with “issues” further community integration and connection more than plays that offer prescriptive solutions or are based on arbitrary themes. Kushner (1997), Bogart (2014), Omasta (2011) and Reason (2010) remind us, however, that audiences will often always find the political even in most superficial narratives. First Stage embraces these political themes not only as an educational device, but also as an indication of respect for

their audiences. They believe their audiences can handle it. Overwhelmingly, the staff agrees that theatre can explain things that are happening in the community and that it can guide children to ask meaningful questions.

FIRST STAGE AND MILWAUKEE

The staff also touched on the fact that Milwaukee is a distinctive community in terms of racial segregation. From 2004 to 2016, segregation in the city has skyrocketed. Many researchers put Milwaukee at the top of America's list of most segregated cities. First Stage staff was honest and persistent that now, more than ever, theatre and the arts need to touch on these issues. Rob argues, "it almost demands that if our audience is diverse, it puts a demand on us artistically that we produce plays with diversity, and put it in the context of considering diversity, not just race but the broad range of diversity." First Stage has worked extensively to bring in and reach out to all communities across the city. Now that they are in the seats, the staff and the organization take their position very seriously to touch on issues that affect every member of their audience.

Aside from Rob, the founder, all the staff I interviewed were involved, either past or present, in the education department at the theatre. Education and educational programming is imperative to how First Stage successfully engages with the community. The company uses various educational tactics to further engage their audiences both before and after the plays. Jeff, Julia, and Sheri all touched on the importance of a well-crafted pre and post show workshop. These workshops "plant seeds," as Julia explained, so students know what to look for before they even walk through the door of the theater. This builds trust with students that may be walking into an unconventional learning environment and also primes them for some of the more difficult themes in the production.

If families and youth are attending the production outside of school or are unavailable to attend a workshop for the show, First Stage offers the opportunities for them to similarly connect with the material through post-show talkbacks and extended talkbacks after specific performances. Jeff believes that if the company is responsible to choose plays with universality, then they must also construct educational or community engagement materials that also allow room to talk, discuss, and connect ideas from the play to the community.

First Stage also utilizes age appropriate casting, one of the only children's theater companies in America to do so. If a character on stage is supposed to be 12 years old, a 12-year-old will always play that part. Similarly, adults play adult characters. Rob explained that when adults are talking on stage, children usually pay attention 70% of the time. When children are talking onstage, however, you could "hear a pin drop." He and the rest of the staff believe that by placing children on the stage, they are building trust in their youth audiences separate from their parents. The relationship, therefore, can be pure between company and youth community.

Finally, First Stage advocates that those who attend their plays also attend or engage with their theatre academy. Rob believes that if students come for a number of years, if they engage in the productions and the classes, they can deepen and develop life skills. From an outsider's perspective, attending and engaging with a company throughout adolescence fosters a trusting relationship. Therefore, children are not only coming to see productions because their parents or schools are bringing them, but they are possibly advocating to be brought. When I attended the show in January of 2016, I saw many students from the summer academy wearing their t-shirts.

In reviewing various enrichment guides and educational materials from the theatre company, and those specifically for *Holes*, there were no overt questions or activities that

asked audiences to connect *Holes* or the First Stage plays to the Milwaukee community. The First Stage staff believes, especially in 2016, that there is little way for audiences to fail to make those connections on their own. Rob believes that just the fact that the audience itself is diverse will lead students to question how what is happening on stage is also happening in their community. The staff did note, however, that they were hoping to pay special attention to the Milwaukee and *Holes* connection in 2016. They do not believe issues of segregation are new in the city, but their capacity to reach and talk with audiences has grown, and the climate of race relations has not changed, but certainly been brought to the surface. Sheri, Julia, and the education team hoped, at the time of the interview, to host talkbacks and workshops with members of social justice organizations in the community. In a follow-up interview I conducted with Sheri, she confirmed that they were able to conduct and benefit from politically and socially conscious workshops surrounding *Holes*. I will go into further detail about how they connected *Holes* to issues in the community in the next chapter.

Julia argues that Milwaukee is “a theatre community that does challenge our young people because we know how smart they are and we know they can handle it.” I believe First Stage was crucial in developing this theatre community. They have not only opened children’s minds to how the arts connect to their community, but they have trained and fostered a community that is eager and willing to do so. First Stage’s mission rests on building life skills through stage skills. Rob believes their productions “enable and empower [youth] to be productive members of their community.”

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS AND FIRST STAGE

While the staff at First Stage was confident in their connection and participation in the community, I was interested in interviewing a sample of adults that were youth in

2004 and the true depth of their relationship to the company. Out of the 11 “youth participants” I interviewed, eight had vivid memories of engaging with First Stage as a child. The other three participants remember First Stage in the community, but were not interested, at that age, in theatre, so they didn’t attend the academy or many productions. Two of the three participants that did not engage with First Stage as children have recognized the company’s importance in the community as adults and have worked for the company as teaching artists or in educational programming.

The two main ways youth were involved with First Stage were either from seeing main stage shows or through attending the theatre academy. Every year, First Stage produces six main stage productions. Families attend these productions on the weekends and schools bring students during the week. Four of my participants were in families that held season tickets to First Stage, and noted that they attended many of the shows. Specifically, for *Holes*, eight of my participants that saw the production went with either school, their parents, or during a First Stage Alumni performance. Two participants went only with school, three went only with their parents, two went with both their parents and school, and one went with her parents and to the First Stage Alumni night.

Four of the 11 participants attribute their love for the arts and connection to the Milwaukee community to First Stage. Ellen noted that she felt like an outsider in her geographical community and found value in the community within the confines of First Stage. Eleanor had similar sentiments. Emma was not a First Stage student until high school and became involved because she had heard about the supportive community within the company. From these interviews, it is clear that First Stage initially focused on the “community” within its own walls, and then worked to spread that outward.

Two of my participants, Kenneth and Eleanor, joined First Stage because they were extremely shy children. Eleanor noted that she would not even speak to adults and

her parents signed her up for First Stage's academy in order to work through that issue. Sam, who never attended the academy as a youth but works with them now as a teaching artist, always sought community through the arts, which is what eventually attracted him to First Stage as an adult. He felt lucky to have that community through his neighborhood and his church, and wants to facilitate that for students now. Ivy attended First Stage productions because her parents were interested in exposing her and her siblings to various cultural experiences. She noted that First Stage was one of the cultural experiences that stuck, and seeing the shows encouraged her to become involved in the academy. Most of my participants were unclear why their parents held season tickets or brought them to shows, but they remember seeing productions as a positive experience.

I interviewed one participant that attended some First Stage shows as a youth through school, but didn't see *Holes* and never attended the theater academy. I was interested in whether or not the impacts of the show disseminated to people outside the First Stage "bubble." He noted that his understanding of *Holes* was primarily through the production in 2004 and hearing his peers and other students talk about seeing the production. He knew a brief synopsis of the show through osmosis from the conversations that First Stage created in the youth community. I think this is a powerful testament to First Stage's position and integration in Milwaukee.

Youth Participants, First Stage, and Politics

In order to analyze the full scope of social and political issues in Milwaukee, I asked youth participants what social and political issues they remember from 2004. Six of my 11 participants remember 2004 being an election year, and two, Kenneth and Lee, remembered it was specifically between Bush and Kerry. Both remembered having negative reactions to Bush being elected president, specifically because they were about

to enter high school and they disagreed with President Bush's policies regarding education. Three participants remembered being involved in conversations around gender rights. One commented on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. One commented on the war in Iraq. Two participants had no recollection of current events from 2004.

Six of the 11 participants touched on segregation issues, specifically, in Milwaukee from 2004. Three of those six participants grew up in segregated neighborhoods and commented on recognizing that oppression from an early age. One of those participants, Ian, remembers 2004 being a year of racial violence in Milwaukee. Those same three participants noted that conversations around political or social issues were difficult to work through in their communities and First Stage offered a safe space for them to work through those issues. The other four participants grew up either in the suburbs or in affluent neighborhoods in the city and remarked that 2004 was a transition year for them as they realized the true segregation issues in the city. Eleanor remarked that she fully realizes her privilege now, and that realization started in 2004. She did not explicitly state that this realization correlates to *Holes* at First Stage, but she did reference that being in the diverse community at First Stage was an agent.

When I asked what the participants remembered from 2004, I did not lead them with any examples or general political and social issues. I was surprised that so many participants recognized segregation issues in Milwaukee and pointed to 2004 as the beginning of that recognition. In Chapter 5, I will further discuss current events from Milwaukee in 2004 in connection to the narrative in *Holes*. Eleanor commented that being involved at First Stage and being around others with such diverse backgrounds truly pushed her to be more politically minded. Ivy, Kenneth, and Ellen also commented that the diversity amongst their peers at First Stage facilitated deeper conversations regarding politics and social issues in Milwaukee. Because First Stage is a highly diverse

environment within a highly segregated city, they are better able to facilitate conversations amongst these audiences surrounding issues of diversity within the community.

CONNECTIONS AND ANALYSIS

In considering the intentions outlined by the First Stage staff and the actualized impact of First Stage as a whole in the community, I was able to draw various connections between intent and outcome. My data reveals that First Stage successfully creates a climate that promotes diversity, that they have successfully utilized age-appropriate casting to further connect with audiences, that they engage students for multiple years which encourages kids to bring what they learned at the organization into the community, and that these strategies impacted how youth audiences perceived social and political issues to varying degrees of power.

Rob, the founder of First Stage, drew a direct connection between diverse students, diverse audiences, and diverse topics. Many of the youth participants commented on First Stage being one of the first diverse programs they were a part of as a youth, specifically those that grew up in predominantly white suburbs. Not only did the youth participants value the diverse make-up of their peers, but they realized the differences between their First Stage community and actual community and were able to think critically about segregation issues in Milwaukee as a whole. Before my participants even walked into the theatre in 2004, the majority of them were already conscious of the social justice issues they would encounter in the play.

The four participants, Maya, Eleanor, Kenneth, and Ivy, that I conducted in-depth interviews and a group workshop with, all agreed that First Stage successfully commented on diversity not only within the student community, but through their

productions as well. First Stage effectively utilized the diversity within its own community to incite conversations about diversity in the Milwaukee community. The First Stage staff was adamant that their audiences were perceptive enough to make the connections between community and stage without it having to be directly stated. Borwick (2012), Sommer (2014), Jeff (2015), Bogart (2014), Klien (2005), and many other theorists and researchers I discussed in my literature review warned about the toxic effects of prescriptive theatre and art for young audiences. First Stage openly supports this idea and advocates through their work for theatre that opens minds to new questions and ideas rather than telling children how to think. I did not have to directly ask my participants whether or not the social justice issues in the play connected to the Milwaukee community, they came to those conclusions on their own.

The majority of my participants noted being involved with First Stage for more than one year. Returning to Rob's hope that students who stay with the organization for many years will gain more skills for communicating with their community, those that had deep relationship with First Stage were more prone to articulate how First Stage impacted their worldview. Youth participants who attended First Stage also spoke about it with their peers outside of the organization. Ian commented that his only recollection of *Holes* from 2004 was through hearing about it from his peers who attended the production. The three participants who did not attend the academy as children knew that it existed and two of them attribute working at First Stage as adults to the high reputation of the academy in the community.

Age appropriate casting is also an advantage to First Stage facilitating youth's connection to the organization and then out to the community. Specifically, for *Holes*, six of the 10 participants who saw the show remembered their peers in the show. It is important to consider, critically, if this sort of association does in fact facilitate a broader

community connection or if it creates a closed group, or “bubble,” of students. If a youth is going to see a production because they have friends in that production, is that the same sort of engagement as a student seeing a production because they are interested in the narrative? After considering the connections the participants made between *Holes* and social justice issues, I believe that regardless of the reason they entered the theatre, First Stage successfully produced, and continues to produce, work with universal themes that all audiences could connect to their lives and to Milwaukee.

Returning to Longo’s (2007) three characteristics of effective community practitioners, reflective, connective, and multimodal in education tactics, First Stage successfully fulfills all three. The First Stage staff all touched on reflective tactics, specifically through how they choose their productions. They administer a wide range of content based on audience and community reaction. Sheri, specifically, outlined all the ways First Stage is connective in production content. In connection with Kushner’s (1997) call for more politically active theatre because of how “politically correct” our conversations at the dinner table have become, First Stage sees their opportunities to engage in connective content in a community setting. Finally, First Stage utilizes various multimodal educational tools to engage their audience. They produce educational materials, host talk backs, facilitate community workshops, and continue to innovate practices to educate and engage audiences.

The final impact, which was not explicitly stated by the staff at First Stage, but I believe is still an important outcome from my participant’s involvement in the organization, is that eight of my 11 participants are still involved in the performative arts, in some way, as adults. Five of those eight participants are still involved in theatre. One is involved in music and one is involved in film. All eight participants drew direct connections to being inspired by the arts as children, specifically through First Stage, and

bring that passion to their careers as adults. All 11 of my participants still view the performative arts as audience members on a monthly basis.

In this chapter, I examined how First Stage utilized various strategies of community engagement in order to involve young audiences in discourse around political and social issues. I concluded that First Stage used its geographical advantages and engagement with various audiences in order to create a diverse community within its own walls. Then, they employed various mechanisms of community dialogue, such as talk backs and pre and post show workshops to prime and further participate with all audiences. The most apparent tactics of community engagement with youth were their longitudinal relationships with their audiences and age appropriate casting. They then capitalized on creating a diverse community within their walls and employing mechanisms of community engagement and dialogue in order to create meaningful dialogue about diversity issues outside of their walls in the Milwaukee community.

Moving into the next chapter of data analysis, I will consider how these impacts have specifically affected the conversations and opinions of my participants who represent the greater Milwaukee community. I will specifically look at First Stage's 2004 and 2016 productions of *Holes*. By assessing how profound First Stage's impact on the community is, I was able to understand how they leveraged their power to open conversations around social and political issues.

Chapter Five: *Holes*, *Fantasy Realism*, and *Empathy*

Because First Stage has established itself as a prominent and locally connected organization, they are able to choose stories that encourage their audiences to reflect critically on their community. The theatre company used *Holes* because it was both well-known and had fantasy elements. Due to the fantasy realism in the piece, youth were further able to consider questions about social and political topics in their community instead of being offered prescriptive solutions. They were able to think about issues within their own community while viewing a piece of theatre that was not explicitly based off a narrative from their community. Therefore, youth were capable of considering a range of narratives in order to practice empathy for all characters and their struggles. Finally, the story ended with a hopeful message, which encouraged youth to make a positive connection with the struggles on stage to the reality of their community and their own lives.

In this chapter, I am going to outline how the use of fantasy realism directed youth towards empathy and positive ideologies surrounding destiny within the limits of *Holes*. In the last chapter, I explained the different social and political climates in Milwaukee in 2004, through the lens of my participants, and if First Stage staff planned on addressing the changes in those climates for their 2016 production. I also established that First Stage's position and integration in the community, as a whole, created a culture that empowered youths to view and use art as a critical thinking tool. I am now going to explore the specific ways my participants explored social and political themes and how they aligned with the organization's goals.

I will begin this chapter by offering an in-depth description of the plot of *Holes*. I believe this will help readers who are unfamiliar with the story make easier connections

to the ideas and themes the participants discuss later on. I will then describe the data I collected in interviews with the First Stage staff pertaining to the story of *Holes*, how they cultivated this story in 2004, then in 2016. I conclude with the staff's beliefs on the connection between the 2004 and 2016 productions.

I will then describe the data I collected in interviews with the community and youth participants. To reiterate from the last chapter, although I label some of these participants as "youth," that is merely in reference to the fact that they were youth in 2004, but are now adults. This section discusses the youth participants memories of the 2004 production, their understanding of the themes and ideas from the production, how they believe *Holes* connects to social justice themes, how their attitudes have shifted in regard to law enforcement over the last 12 years, and their perceptions of narratives in either fantasy or realistic contexts. Finally, I will outline data from the group workshop I conducted with four of these community and youth participants. I will conclude this chapter with an analysis between data collected from the staff and the youth participants.

THE STORY OF *HOLES*

Louis Sachar wrote the book Holes in 1998 and it quickly became a young adult bestseller. In 2003 the book was made into both a movie and a play, the stage production first premiered at Seattle Children's Theatre. First Stage was the second company to produce *Holes* in 2004.

Holes is the story of a young boy, Stanley Yelnats, who comes from a long familial line of bad luck. One day, while walking home from school, a pair of sneakers falls from the sky into Stanley's hands. It is discovered that the sneakers belonged to a famous athlete who was auctioning them off at a local orphanage, and Stanley, caught by

the police, has the option to either go to a juvenile detention center or to Camp Green Lake. Because Stanley had never been to camp before, he decided on the later.

As the play unfolds, there are various flashbacks to events from Stanley's family's past. Beginning in 19th century Latvia, Stanley's great-great-grandfather, broke a promise to Madame Zeroni after being heartbroken and leaving for America. He promised her that he would carry her up the mountain in their village, as she became older, to drink from the well at the top. This broken promise caused Madame Zeroni to leave a curse on Stanley's family, explaining their destiny and ill-fate in many aspects of their family's life.

In present day, when Stanley arrives at Camp Green Lake, he finds that it is not a camp, but instead a desert site where boys are sent to dig holes every day. They are required to dig one hole, five feet wide and five feet deep seven days a week. They are told that digging holes builds character. The characters from Camp Green Lake in the production are Mr. Sir the camp supervisor, "Mom" the camp counselor in charge of Stanley's digging cohort, and the Warden, the only woman at Camp Green Lake who oversees all aspects of the camp and the boys.

The play also flashes back, from time to time, to the history of Camp Green Lake. In present day, there is no lake at Camp Green Lake. In the late 1800s, however, Green Lake was a flourishing town, located right on the edge of the water. The play flashes back to the story of a white school teacher, Kate Barlow, and her growing love for a black onion farmer from the community, Sam. When people from the town see them kiss, they chase Kate and Sam out onto the lake in a boat and shoot Sam dead. Kate, having escaped, lives the rest of her life as an outlaw, robbing travelers all along the West. Stanley's family believe that once Stanley's great grandfather was robbed by Kate Barlow, and they attribute that to their bad luck from Latvia.

Green Lake is also home to a specific reptile called a yellow-spotted lizard. These lizards are deadly after just one bite. The day the town shoots Sam dead was the last day a drop of rain ever fell on the town, and soon the lake dried up and the town ceased to exist. Kate runs into the man who shot Sam years later in the abandoned town and he attempts to force her to disclose where she has buried all her looted treasure. She picks up and is willingly bit by a yellow spotted lizard, bringing the answer to his question to her grave.

Back in present day at Camp Green Lake, Stanley and his cohort encounter various challenges. Stanley befriends another boy, Zero, who is heavily disrespected by all inmates and staff at the camp. All the boys at Camp Green Lake have nicknames, but they say that Zero is not Zero's nickname, he is just a zero. Zero is also unable to read. Stanley and Zero decide that if Stanley teaches Zero to read, Zero will dig his hole for him. This is the beginning of an increasingly tense environment considering Stanley is white and Zero is black. They are soon accused by their peers of playing out an age-old narrative of a black man doing a white man's work. As the boys continue to fight and argue, Zero eventually snaps and runs away from the camp. The staff of the camp decide to let him go because the only thing surrounding Camp Green Lake is a dry, hot, waterless desert. A few days later, Stanley also runs away in order to search for Zero.

Stanley eventually finds Zero under Sam the onion farmer's old boat in what would have been the middle of the lake. Zero had been eating "sploosh" for the past few days, which we later find out is preserved onions. Stanley tells Zero the story of when his great-grandfather was robbed by Kate Barlow, and how instead of dying, found refuge on "god's thumb." As the boys look out over the desert, they see a hill in the distance that looks like a thumb coming out of the earth. They decide to try and journey to it, in hopes of finding water or people. Zero becomes so weak on the journey, that Stanley has to

carry him to the top of what they believe is god's thumb. When they get to the top, they find a lush onion farm and, after digging, find water.

They sit atop the mountain for days, eating onions and drinking water. They share stories about their past and Stanley learns that Zero was the one who stole the sneakers from the orphanage, where he was an orphan, because he didn't know they were important because he couldn't read the plaque from the auction. When he realized they were expensive, he threw them off an overhead pass where they landed on Stanley's head. They also realize that Zero's name is from his great-great-grandmother, Madame Zeroni from Latvia. Because Stanley carried Zero up the mountain to drink water, he broke the curse on his family.

Once they both regain enough strength, they return to the camp, realizing the reason they were digging holes was to find treasure from Kate Barlow in the first place. They think that if they can find treasure before they are caught by the Warden, they can use it as leverage in their punishment. In the middle of the night, they climb down into a hole and Stanley finds a buried suitcase. Before he can take it, however, both the boys are caught by the Warden, and as she shines her flashlight on them, it is revealed that they are covered in yellow-spotted lizards.

While Stanley and Zero had been away, a lawyer visited the camp to talk with Stanley, and the Warden created excuses as to why she could not see him. The lawyer returns to find the boys still in the hole, with the lizards, while the Warden waits. As they sit there and the sun rises, Zero is able to read "Stanley Yelnats" on the suitcase in the hole, because of the reading lessons Stanley had previously given him. They realize that the suitcase belonged to Stanley's great-grandfather. They finally get away from the lizards and Stanley's lawyer has him gather his things to go home. The lawyer vows to have Camp Green Lake shut down, and as they are about to leave, Stanley refuses to go

without Zero. The last scene of the play is Stanley being reunited with his parents and Zero being reunited with his mother.

THE PRODUCTION TEAM

During interviews with the production team, I asked them to talk about the story of *Holes* in three different contexts: What is the story of *Holes* about? Why were those themes important to Milwaukee in 2004? Why are they important to Milwaukee in 2016? By asking them about these three specific frameworks, I aimed to draw conclusions about the longitudinal effects of the message of the play and how it connects, or does not connect, with the Milwaukee community. Later, I will discuss how I discussed those same ideas with my youth participants and how those ideas correlate through connections of fantasy realism, empathy, and destiny.

Important Themes in *Holes*

After interviewing the four staff members connected with the production, I was able to understand the emerging themes from the play through the lens of the production team and the company as a whole. First and foremost, all of the production staff agreed that *Holes* is and was an engaging story before it ever became a play. They credit the plot of the story to the original novel, and are adamant that without that, this narrative would have suffered. After establishing the importance of *Holes*' engaging plot, they agreed that the emerging themes from the story were a coming of age story for young people in transitional periods and understanding the injustices inflicted upon disadvantaged youth.

The story follows protagonist, Stanley Yelnats, through a period of turmoil and change for not only him, but his family and his eventual friends. Jeff explains that at its core, *Holes* is "about Stanley's journey and the deeper understanding of who he is and who he is meant to be." Rob, Sheri, and Julia agreed, all four staff participants having

used the term “journey” multiple times throughout their interviews. They broke down Stanley’s journey further into two themes that uncover connections to a coming of age story.

Rob explained that many young people connect to the story of *Holes* because it touches on how to adapt to new surroundings and communities. He states, “that happens every time a child moves to another grade, moves to another school, moves to another community: they encounter the exact same problems.” Not only is Stanley on a journey, he is on a unique journey of transition that many young people can identify with, on varying levels, in their own lives. Rob, Sheri, Julia, and Jeff all spoke extensively on the importance of friendship in the story. Friendship in Stanley’s journey is imperative to his ability to cope with his surroundings and new community. Specifically, all of the production staff spoke about Stanley’s friendship with Zero. Sheri and Julia both addressed that Stanley and Zero became close and loyal friends because they were oppressed for different reasons and used their connection as a tool to rise from that oppression. Jeff agreed that Stanley’s ability to see the worth in Zero propelled him into maturity, and Zero’s honest and noble core made the friendship stronger.

Alongside the themes connected to the coming of age story present in Stanley, and arguably other characters in the story, are the varying levels of maturity from young people when they are oppressed by adults. Through Stanley’s lens, he was served injustice after injustice, and Rob along with other staff admire how he copes and addresses these issues. They believe the story poses important questions about when it is appropriate to stand up to an adult and if there is a positive or negative way to do it. Jeff touched on the moments of violence in the show and appreciates how not only does the audience see these moments play out, but they understand the repercussions. This, according to Jeff and Sheri, are important lessons for Stanley and, ideally, the audience as

well. Part of growing up is understanding that adults are not always good or fair, and there are positive and negative ways to handle situations where that is the case.

The final topic within the theme of Stanley's journey and coming of age is how he and other characters deal with destiny and fate. All four production staff touched on the importance of destiny and fate. Jeff believed the story, again, asks important questions surrounding these topics. He wondered, "is fate a real thing or do we make our own fate? Is luck a real thing or do we make our own luck?" Julia and Rob similarly explained that the characters and Stanley, specifically, used friendship and community to take hold of their own fate and destiny. Because so much of the plot relies on how the characters fit into the story of *their* fate, the production staff saw an opportunity with the plot to address what happens when humans are, instead, in charge of that fate.

The other major theme outlined by the production staff was that *Holes* sheds a crucial light on the way youth, specifically young men of color, are treated in the juvenile justice system. Sheri was very transparent in explaining, "*Holes* is about the injustice that can be inflicted onto young people who do not have a chance. How the systems that are put in place to protect them end up victimizing them." Jeff agreed that the story has a strong foundation in "issues of race, prejudice, and social justice and how we treat one another." Further on, I will discuss how these themes were especially pertinent to the Milwaukee community, both past and present. The staff agree, though, that these themes are important and connect to a universal audience. Regardless of the political and social climate of society today or in 2004, we have long dealt with issues of race, youth incarceration, and social justice, and this narrative is important for all audiences in all communities.

***Holes* and Milwaukee in 2004**

Out of the four staff I interviewed, three were active staff at First Stage during *Holes* in 2004. Rob was the Artistic Director of the company, Jeff was the stage director, and Sheri was an actress in the show. Julia was not employed by First Stage at that time, but was mentored by the Education Director at that time and remembers various conversations with him about the show. All four members of the current staff were honest that focus on the themes surrounding racial injustice during the 2004 was less present than it would be in 2016. They recognize that these issues were just as important in 2004 as they are today, but because of heightened conversations in the media and amongst community groups, such as Black Lives Matter, they have a deeper responsibility to touch on these issues. They did explain that the connection to the book and literature were an important aspect of the 2004 production as were some topics on incarceration and violence as it connected to the Milwaukee community.

Both Jeff and Julia were confident that a large appeal of the show in 2004 was that the book was so popular. Julia noted that “the book was so popular, the movie was coming out, but it was on every upper elementary and middle school students’ desk.” They saw this as an advantage to connecting with the Milwaukee community. They were transparent that this sort of name recognition got students, parents, families, and communities in the door. As I discussed above, however, the engaging story is what encouraged them to think critically beyond what they had only read in the book. Jeff noted that it is always a balance between choosing stories that have deep and profound ideologies and stories that will sell a lot of tickets. First Stage was fortunate that *Holes* fell, and still falls, into both of those categories.

Rob remembers meaningful conversations with community members surrounding their ability to connect *Holes* to incarceration in Milwaukee. He noted that many people

who saw the show had family members who were incarcerated and they felt empowered because First Stage was touching on that narrative. While I will discuss incarceration in Milwaukee, specifically amongst youth and boys of color later in the chapter, Rob pointed out that incarceration in these populations is not a new problem. Because he attended various productions with families and school groups, he felt confident that students were making that connection.

Jeff remembers being very conscious of how violence was crafted during the 2004 production, specifically because Milwaukee has a deep history with violence and communities. As outlined previously, an important theme in the story, as a whole, to the production team was how violence and handling violence denotes maturity. Jeff, Julia, and Sheri believed that because the youth were seeing so many perspectives and hearing so many opinions on the value and downfalls of violence in the community, seeing it in *Holes* could allow them to contextualize all aspects of the issue and come to their own perspectives and opinions.

Sheri, as an actress in the original production, noted that she was aware of the social themes, and while they were discussed, she believed they would be much more present in the production process in 2016. Not only has the landscape changed, but the company is older and more mature and the production team has a greater capability and responsibility to make the social justice themes integral to the audience experience.

Aside from the Presidential election in 2004, which many community participants cited during their interview, Milwaukee was rocked by a controversial episode of police brutality against an unarmed black man. Smith (2014) examines how different news sources documented this tragedy, and uncovered that newspapers serving a predominantly white clientele were generally on the side of the police officers while newspapers serving a predominantly black clientele questioned this occurrence and the

intentions of the police officers. On October 24th, off-duty, white police officers brutally beat a black man in a Milwaukee south side neighborhood. Witnesses saw upwards of a dozen men kicking and threatening this man with a knife. The police officers claimed that he had attempted to steal one of their badges and they were restraining him. A jury in a state trial acquitted the police officers of all charges. Smith (2014) argues that this event was the worst incident of police brutality against a man of color in 25 years. This incident took place after First Stage's production of *Holes* in 2004, but further exemplifies racial tensions between young, black men of color and law enforcement in Milwaukee over the past 12 years.

I noted in Chapter Four that First Stage was created in 1987. In 2004, the company was seventeen years old. This year, in 2016, the company is coming upon its thirtieth birthday. First Stage is almost 50% older in 2016 than they were in 2004. Rob, Jeff, Julia, and Sheri have been with the company in various roles almost since the beginning. Jeff was transparent that he is in a different place, consciously, in 2016, than he was in 2004. I would argue that is inevitably true for all on the production staff. Sheri echoed this sentiment and explained that this growth would have a positive effect on the way the company might approach the social justice themes in the production within the Milwaukee community in 2016.

***Holes* and Milwaukee in 2016.**

While the production team had a vast and diverse list of all the topics and themes the story of *Holes* touched on, they were specific when it came to 2016 that the biggest theme the play will most likely consider is social justice issues surrounding race discrimination and incarceration. All four production team members spent a lot of time talking about Stanley's journey and coming of age, but they noted that audience members

make those connections on an individual level. Either a young viewer sees part of his or herself in Stanley, Zero, or another character, or not. Ideally they would be able to craft a production so each child could connect with a part of their personal narrative. While this is an important aspect to how themes are disseminated, when considering how this production affected larger communities and conversations in those communities, ideologies surrounding social justice issues directly link to answering that question. The production staff noted that the most pertinent social justice issues that would be present in the 2016 production of *Holes* would be incarcerated boys, youth in social welfare systems, and racial injustice in the judicial system.

Rob, who spoke on the importance of incarceration as a theme in *Holes* in 2004, noted that “incarceration has not stopped, it’s gotten worse. You have a brand new group of kids. A whole new generation that needs to hear this message.” Sheri agreed that incarceration, specifically amongst young black men, is a huge issue in Milwaukee today. To contextualize this issue, according to a study published in 2013 from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee has the highest rate of incarcerated black men in the country. Almost 13% of black men in Milwaukee face jail time at some point in their life, which is almost double the national average of 6.7%. (Link, 2013) When Rob explained that many children in the audience from 2004 had a family member that had faced incarceration, the probability of that same reality in 2016 is much higher. Jeff attributes part of this issue to segregation and notes that “you can’t produce a play like this without being aware that Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in America.”

Sheri was adamant that youth will relate to the idea that many times they “meet their demise at the hands of those who should protect them.” She mentioned both police officers and parents or guardians within this theme. All four production staff noted that youth dealing with corrupt adults was a more general theme in the story. They echoed

that this would be a specifically important topic in Milwaukee in 2016. Julia, similar to Jeff's position on the obvious topic of incarceration, believes that it is difficult to watch or read this story without making a connection to how authority and those in positions of power have been abusing their positions. All four staff members agreed that in a city that struggles in social welfare for youth and children, there are few outlets for them to relate or think critically about their oppression. Because children are often taught to respect and obey authority, they are confused when that authority treats them in an unjust way. Theatre and *Holes*, specifically, could help them work through that confusion and turmoil.

First Stage producing *Holes* in 2004 and 2016 offers bookends to an interesting and tumultuous time in Milwaukee's cultural history. All four staff members commented on the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and how prevalent deaths at the hands of law enforcement has rattled Milwaukee and forced its citizens to face inconvenient truths about the segregated community. *Holes* is inevitably a part of that conversation according to the production staff. Rob commented on how this audience will bring an entirely new perspective into the theatre when they view *Holes* in 2016. He comments that it was possibly easier to ignore these injustices in 2004, but it is nearly impossible now to be unaware of what is happening in society. While moments of racial tension are not the foundation of *Holes*, they will certainly be a foundation of the production in 2016. Jeff and Sheri commented on how important it will be to craft the scene when Sam is shot by the white townspeople. "I believe the shooting of Sam will be a challenge. We have so many sounds of gunshots in the community, that it will be a very familiar sound," Sheri explained. Julia made profound connections between the shooting scene being set "in the past" and yet many students will view it as an issue that is still very present in current events.

Connecting *Holes* from 2004 to 2016

While various themes and ideas emerged from my interviews with Jeff, Sheri, Julia, and Rob, the longitudinal ideologies from 2004 and 2016 seemed centered on issues of social justice and oppression. I mentioned how the 12 years between 2004 and 2016 allowed time for the production team, the company, and the story to grow in the Milwaukee community. Jeff agreed that he felt his team was able to “be more aware of how to do that [focus on issues of social justice] effectively and responsibly.” In Chapter Four, I outlined how First Stage feels a deep responsibility to the community to touch on issues and create conversations around conflicting ideologies. Sheri echoed this responsibility by stating, “I believe it is important that First Stage revisits *Holes*, and in this particular time because young people are losing their lives at the hands of police.” First Stage, while very conscious of racial segregation and violence in 2004, realized these problems were still pervasive and often getting worse within the communities they vowed to serve and collaborate with. Not only is it obvious for an artist, audience member, or community member to make the connection between the narrative of *Holes* and what is happening in Milwaukee socially and politically, but First Stage understands its responsibility to put those themes and ideas at the forefront of their crafted narrative.

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

In order to corroborate the ideas and themes from *Holes* between 2004 and 2016 with the ideas and themes outlined by the production staff, I designed and implemented various research methods to look at a holistic view of how the production affected these participant’s conversations and perceptions of social justice issues in Milwaukee. Eight out of the eleven participants I interviewed saw the show in 2004, therefore, I will only use data from their interviews. I will begin by describing how the youth participants remembered *Holes* from 2004. Then I will explain what specific themes and ideologies

the participants drew from *Holes* in 2004. I will transition to information about the participant's attitudes and experiences towards social justice and injustice with law enforcement in Milwaukee and how those ideas connect with *Holes* in both 2004 and 2016. I will also discuss the youth participant's views on fantasy versus realism in viewing plays around themes of social justice. Finally, I will review data from the memory workshop.

Memory Scales from *Holes* in 2004

I asked all youth participants, in order to gauge their memory from 2004, to rate aspects of the production on a 10-point Likert scale. I was primarily interested in memories they could recall visually, which included aesthetics, actors and characters. I wanted to know their initial perceptions of their own memories in connection with the show. This information was helpful in order to understand basic memories from the production from all youth participants. It was also helpful as a measurement tool for the workshop participants as they recalled memories throughout the research process. I will list the statement distributed to the participants and then the aggregated break down of answers by how the participants rated them.

- I remember the theatre or the venue. **Average: 9.86**
 - (10) - 7 participants
 - (9) - 1 participant
- I remember characters from the story or characters in the play. **Average: 5.25**
 - (8) - 1 participant
 - (7) - 3 participants
 - (5) - 1 participant
 - (4) - 1 participant
 - (3) - 1 participant
 - (1) - 1 participant
- I remember visual aesthetics from the production. **Average: 4.14**
 - (8) - 1 participant

- (7) - 1 participant
- (5.5) - 1 participant
- (3.5) - 1 participant
- (3) - 1 participant
- (1) - 2 participants
- I remember the plot or the story of *Holes*. **Average: 9.86**
 - (10) - 7 participants
 - (9) - 1 participant

Many participants credited knowing the story or the plot of *Holes* to having read the book either in school or on their own during that time. *Holes* was a bestselling young adult novel during the early 2000s, a concept corroborated by all staff at First Stage during the staff interviews. Overall, the participants remembered broad concepts like the venue and the plot at a higher level than specific concepts like lighting effects or character names.

Themes and Ideas from *Holes*

After interviewing the adult staff at First Stage about the themes and ideas that were important in their iteration of the story, I asked the youth participants the same question in order to begin connecting intention and impact. Themes and ideas from my eight participants in this section of the research naturally divided into two broad categories: ideas around society and ideas around the self or individual.

Two participants, Maya and Eleanor, explained that *Holes*, when they saw it in 2004, was about finding a sense of self and finding friends to compliment that. Maya tapped into the idea of destiny, “*Holes* is about fitting in and kind of countering the expectations the world has for you”. Eleanor furthered that idea by adding, “what I really remember from the production were the friendships”. Ivy made a slightly similar connection when she explained that for her, *Holes* was about, “finding out where you lie

on the scale of injustice”. She tapped into the idea that there is a self-reflective aspect to the narrative of *Holes*, but furthered that to issues surrounding society.

Five participants, Nadia, Ellen, Emma, Ivy, and Kenneth, saw the ideas in *Holes* as more connected to society than to the individual self. As explained above, Ivy understood the implications of *Holes* on the individual, but expanded that idea to how we see ourselves and can then use or not use that to affect societal change. The way she explained her connection to *Holes* was almost a call to action. Nadia, Ellen, Emma, and Kenneth were more reflective on the messages in *Holes*. Kenneth explained that the play was a representation of how youth that identify within certain races or classes are impacted by larger societal misjudgments in America. He was interested less in how injustice was inflicted between specific people, and instead looked toward the larger systems that allow these injustices to take place. Nadia and Ellen agreed that *Holes* was essentially about power dynamics, and saw the ideas in *Holes* directed more toward police and young men of color. Emma similarly saw this connection, but also believed that *Holes* accurately represented both sides of the argument equally; police can be bad, but they are not always at fault. She felt that because Camp Green Lake was shut down at the end of the play, the story was illustrating that, in the end, the justice system works. My final participant, Abby, didn’t comment on the themes and ideas in *Holes*.

***Holes* and Social Justice**

Because the staff at First Stage outlined how, in 2016, *Holes* would hit harder on social issues, I asked my youth participants to talk about this shifting message over the past 12 years and what sort of weight it holds today. I asked them to reflect first on what they thought the main ideas or messages were in *Holes*, which is outlined above, and then talk about whether that message is more important or less important now in 2016.

Because the messages each participant took from *Holes* fell, naturally, into two different categories, their reflections on these messages also fell into those same categories.

In looking at themes surrounding the self, particularly the coming-of-age story and the search for identity, Maya believed that the message is no more or less important, but is exactly the same. She believed that because each individual person sees this story from wherever they are in their personal, emotional, and physical life, that different parts of the story speak to individuals in that moment. Because certain ideas can be applicable to different ages, genders, and emotions, people will always find parts of the story relevant. Eleanor, who also commented on the individual nature of the messages within *Holes*, did not feel like she could answer this question without seeing the show again in 2016. She wondered if the production would even be focusing on the same things, and if not, then whether or not the message of “friendship” is relevant today.

The participants that focused on more socially applicable themes generally believed that these themes are more important today than they were back in 2004. Nadia, Abby, Ellen, and Ivy stressed the importance of this message because it is a conversation Milwaukee is having right now. Kenneth agreed, and also pointed out, that this message is not just important because it is current, but because societal justice has, in many instances, gotten worse. He noted that inequality in race and class are always going to be present in the America we live in, so producing work like *Holes*, societies have a platform to have those conversations.

Shifting Attitudes: Law Enforcement 2004 - 2016

First Stage staff believed that audiences would be more focused in 2016 on connecting *Holes* to police brutality and how young men, specifically young men of color, interact with law enforcement. Therefore, I asked my youth participants about their

shifting attitudes from 2004 to 2016. The majority of the youth participants noted a shift from positive or no opinion of law enforcement in 2004, before viewing *Holes*, to a negative opinion in 2016. Some participants either started with a negative opinion and stayed negative or started with a positive opinion and stayed positive. No participants had a negative opinion of law enforcement in 2004 and have a positive one, currently, in 2016.

Nadia noted that her view on law enforcement has stayed relatively positive since 2004. She stated that she did not interact with the police as a youth in 2004 and does not now, in 2016, as an adult. She is aware of social movements against police brutality, but only hears about it on the news. Alternatively, Eleanor, Kenneth, and Nadia did not have positive interactions with or opinions of law enforcement as youth in 2004, and still have negative opinions of them as adults. All three participants attribute their negative experiences as children to issues their family faced with the police and experiencing corruption first hand. Kenneth was the only participant that, as a high school student in 2004, was personally detained by law enforcement, adding to his negative view. In 2016, Eleanor, Kenneth, and Nadia attributed their negative opinion on law enforcement to broader, deeper issues within society as a whole instead of just their personal experiences. All three have been a part of social movements criticizing police brutality, specifically against young men of color. Eleanor was present for the shooting of a young black man in Milwaukee and attributed her negative attitude towards law enforcement, in part, to that incident. Kenneth described the current issues with law enforcement as a “cultural problem.”

Abby, Ellen, Ivy, and Maya all noted dramatic shifts in their opinion towards law enforcement. They all noted that their only interaction with police officers in or prior to 2004 was through the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program that all public

school children are required to take in the state of Wisconsin. All four of these participants grew up in fairly safe, low crime areas and were taught that police were friendly. Since witnessing corruption, specifically over the past 4 years, these same participants now all agreed that the system is not serving certain identities within the Milwaukee community. Ellen, who now lives in New York City, said she is personally uncomfortable around police. Abby, Ivy, and Maya stated that they do not interact with police enough nor are in situations where they would personally feel uncomfortable.

Realism versus Fantasy

I asked my youth participants if they would prefer to see a play, in 2016, that directly connected to the political landscape of Milwaukee or if they would be more inclined to see a play formatted with fantasy elements and metaphorical meaning. Answers and opinions from my participants were widespread, but generally fell into three categories. Participants either believed that they would be more inclined to a realistic production, that they would be inclined to view both equally, or they would prefer a production based in fantasy.

Nadia and Emma were more inclined to see a realistic production around political and social justice themes. Their reasoning, however, was slightly different. Nadia believed that as an adult, she would be more ready to face the direct statements in a realistic production and be able to perceive and assess them objectively. Emma, on the other hand, believed that productions that are not direct with their messages are offering a disservice to audiences. She believes that people already have their opinions and they should not be tricked into viewing something with a secret message, they should have the option up front to view that message or not.

Ivy and Eleanor had a difficult time choosing between one type of production or the other. They gave well-thought out arguments for attending both types. Ivy argued that direct and realistic productions can be beneficial for adults who are open-minded. Alternatively, she believed that direct and realistic themes can be too shocking and too prescriptive for children. She settled that fantasy allows children to make connections to social and political ideas as they are ready instead of forcing them to see one way or the other. Eleanor had a similar argument for each type of narrative. She agreed that she would, “like to come to conclusions myself. I don’t like being beaten over the head with themes and ideas and what I think should be seen as important.”

Abby, Ellen, Kenneth, and Maya stated that they are more inclined towards fantasy and metaphorical work. Focusing more on adults and self-motivation, Ellen believes that hyper-realism just is not effective because people already have an opinion. This was similar to Nadia’s view, but Ellen instead used this as an argument against realistic narratives. Maya had a similarly simple analysis. She stated, “I think sometimes you set out to make art with a message in mind, it sometimes can take away from the overall expression of the art.” They both argued that theatre should be a place for open conversations, and direct, restricted messages do not ultimately leave space for those conversations. Kenneth and Abby focused more on the specifics of how fantasy and grand narratives create space for conversations around difficult topics in a specific society. Abby advocated for metaphor connected to political and social themes because it encourages critical thinking from all sides of an argument. She believed that if we can directly identify with only one character and only one opinion, we are not inclined to consider the other opinions if they are represented. Kenneth agreed that we do not need more art that tells us how to live our lives, instead we need art that promotes discussion. He concluded that, “when departing from reality for a bit, we are able to accurately

represent our community in terms of the subjectivity of how humans perceive and interact with the world.” Abby similarly stated, “[Fantasy] is about learning to empathize with other people, and I think asking kids to do that and make them make those connections themselves is teaching them an important skill rather than teaching them important information.”

MEMORY WORKSHOP

I conducted a memory and theme workshop with Ivy, Kenneth, Eleanor, and Maya in order to delve deeper into how the memories of the themes from *Holes* did or did not affect their personal attitudes towards societal and political issues. I began with a bridge activity so the participants could get to know each other and each other’s interactions and participations with *Holes*, First Stage and art-making. Each participant chose a color marker:

- Eleanor – Purple
- Maya – Red
- Ivy – Blue
- Kenneth – Green

I then read them a series of statements that corresponded with a number, and they wrote that number on a large, collaborative scale according to their position. The statements were:

1. I am an artist.
2. I am a viewer of art (performed or otherwise).
3. I see live theatre often.
4. I enjoy seeing live theatre.
5. I work with or interact with youth regularly.
6. The performing arts were important to me as a child (in 2004).
7. I enjoy plays that are realistic and about real people and real life events.
8. I enjoy plays that are fantasy or fiction.

The visual from this exercise is shown below.

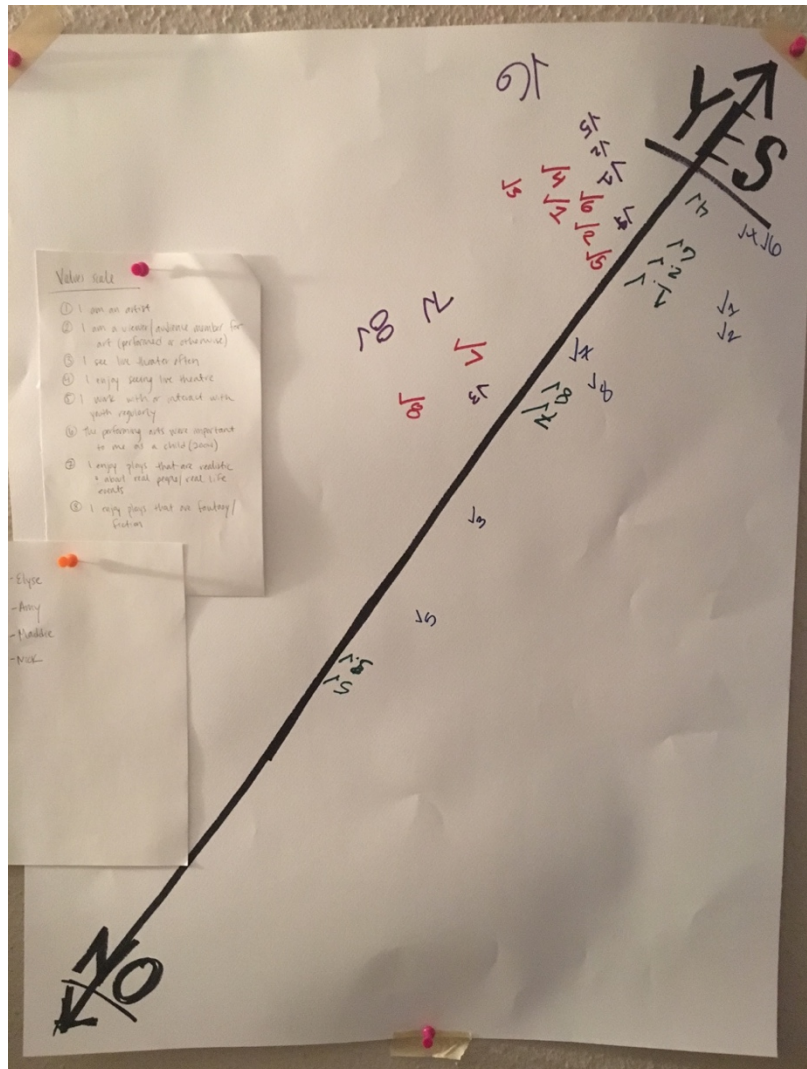


Figure 1: Visual Bridge Activity from Group Workshop (2016).

Then, the group workshop transitioned into focusing on memory recollection from 2004. The group was able to flesh out the majority of the plot after using collective memory recollection. While the average for individual memories surrounding characters and aesthetics was relatively low, once they were able to talk through the production as a group, they remembered almost all the characters and various aesthetic traits from the 2004 production. The group listed the majority of the characters and actors and listed

aesthetics from lighting, set design, costumes, and sound. Ivy, Kenneth, and Eleanor, who generally have a more longitudinal connection to First Stage had a better memory recollection that Maya who has a more current connection to First Stage. Below is an image of the visual exercise where they connected and concluded on memories from the 2004 production.

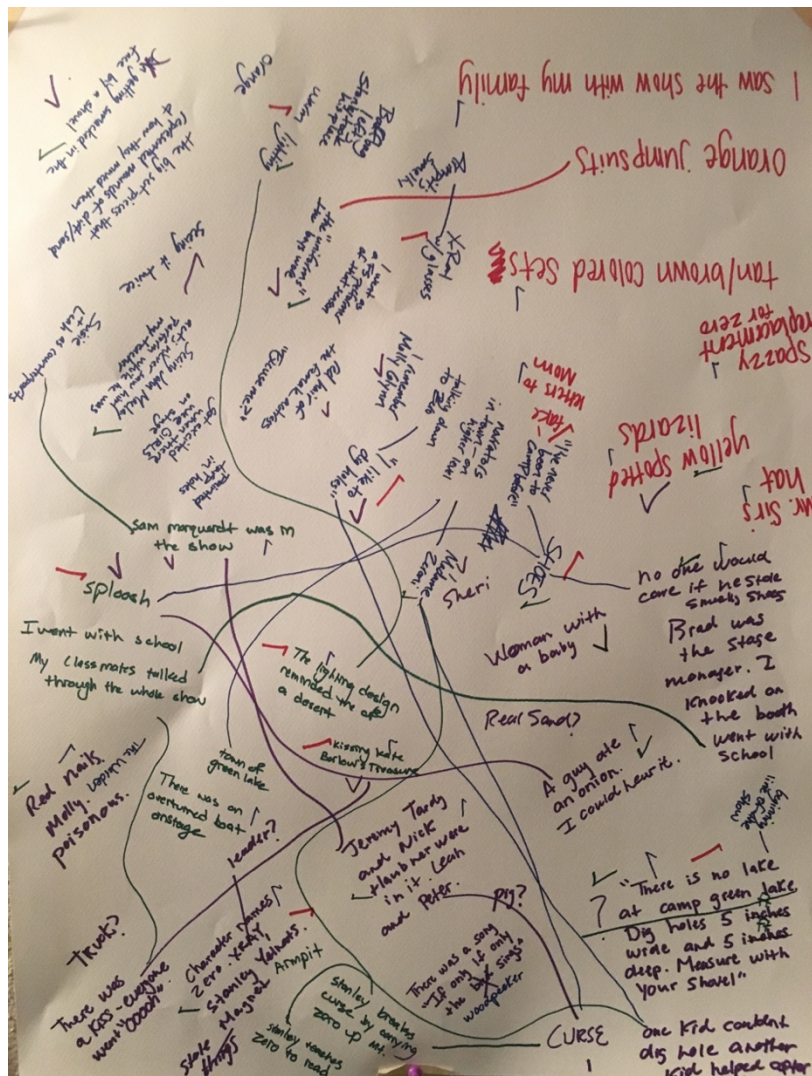


Figure 2: Visual Exercise on Memory Recollection from Group Workshop (2016).

Then, the participants took these memories and the consequential discussions and chose five key themes that they believed were most important in the 2004 production. I asked them to look at those themes and rank them from which theme or “idea” is most important in their personal lives and art-making now as adults. The visual representation from that exercise is below.

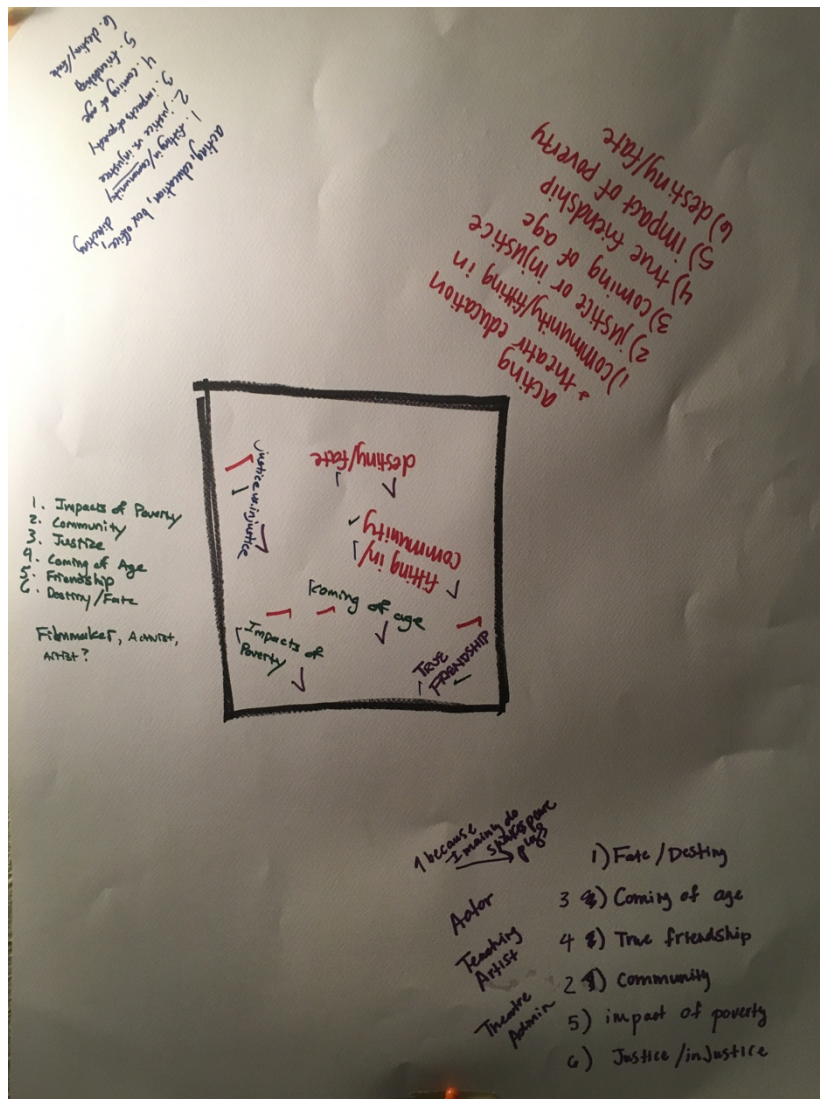


Figure 3: Visual Exercise from Theme Coding during Group Workshop (2016).

These four participants agreed that *Holes* from 2004 touched on five main themes:

- Destiny and Fate
- Friendship
- Coming of Age
- Impacts of Poverty connected to Race
- Justice versus Injustice

Destiny and Fate

This theme was the most contested amongst the participants. Kenneth alleged that this theme is problematic, especially in a current setting. He stated that the idea of a “happy ending doesn’t exist for the other kids, for 95% of people who actually go through the same situation. There is no happy ending, they just keep digging *Holes*.” Eleanor argued, however, that this idea was one of the reasons she liked the show. Her and Kenneth agreed that the reason youth theatre has a happy ending is because it is the ending the audience wants. They did not agree, however, on whether that was a positive or a negative idea. Ivy saw the destiny and fate less connected to society and more connected to personal struggle and growth. She explained it as the “little dash of hope in the story.”

Friendship

Ivy believed that the 2016 production would focus less on friendship as a theme than it did in 2004. Both her and Eleanor appreciated this narrative in 2004, but Ivy thought that other themes would be more important, and “friendship” may fall away alongside themes surrounding social justice.

Coming of Age

While all four participants agreed that this theme was present in 2004, no one had a comment on whether it would be present in 2016 or if it was an important narrative to

begin with. Many of the participants connected with this theme in their individual interviews, but no one commented on it in the group workshop.

Impacts of Poverty Connected to Race

All four participants agreed that the production would most likely focus more on this theme than the company had in 2004. Maya stated that it would be difficult for any company producing this work not to highlight race or injustice towards those in poverty as a main theme. Kenneth commented on how First Stage deciding to even produce this play again is commentary on how these issues have gotten worse. He described the company and play as saying, “come on guys, have we learned nothing? We were talking about this 12 years ago, these are still problems, let’s wake up and pay attention.”

Justice versus Injustice

Kenneth had an interesting observation that this theme is so crucially crafted through the eyes of the youth characters. The audience only understands how these injustices are felt through the eyes of a child. The other participants agreed that every kid, at some point, feels that they have been wronged or oppressed. They all agreed that this theme was important in 2004 and would still be present in 2016.

ANALYSIS AND CONNECTIONS

After considering the data collected from my interviews and workshops, I believe First Stage’s impact on the community through its 2004 production and 2016 reproduction of *Holes* is palpable and realized. It is clear that the majority of the intent from the adult staff was realized in the conversations I had personally with the youth participants and the conversations they had with each other. I narrowed in on three main ideas and how ideas around community and community conversations were furthered

through the two productions of *Holes*: relevancy of themes, observations on community edification and cohesion, and empathy through fantasy.

Themes

To summarize, the adult staff members outlined that their productions of *Holes* would be primarily focus on Stanley's coming-of-age story and social injustice inflicted on young men of color in the judicial system. While the group workshop yielded various themes, they could all arguably be connected to the two themes outlined by the production staff. When I interviewed each participant individually, they connected mainly with ideas around growing up or coming-of-age and social injustice amongst oppressed individuals.

Some of the youth participants noted that they connected well with how they personally fit into narrative of *Holes*, and how it reflected or challenged their ideas of growing up. If we return to Bettelheim's (1976) analysis of how fairy tales psychologically open children up to new ideas with chaos and friendship, this theme holds true. Bettelheim (1976) explained that children appreciate fairy tales because they are able to insert their own experiences along the journey of the protagonist whenever they believe it to be appropriate. Because *Holes* is structurally a fairy tale, according to Pinsent (2002), it successfully achieves the goal of scaffolding children's self-reflection about their own journey and their own story.

Holes as a work, as I stated earlier, is not centered on themes of social injustice in youth incarceration. At First Stage, however, both adult and youth participants noted that it would be impossible in this day and age to ignore that aspect of the story. Whether or not Louis Sachar knew what he would be commenting on over a decade after he wrote the narrative of *Holes*, he has touched on a conversation extremely current, especially in

Milwaukee. I was moved after hearing both the youth and the adults state that not only has the crisis surrounding social injustice around incarcerated men of color gotten worse, but it is a duty of theatre artists to comment on this and create work that starts a conversation. Kushner (1997) was adamant, almost 20 years ago, that we must not shy away from political and social themes in theatre. Along with Brook (1968) and Grotowski (1968), Kushner (1997) gave us a call to action, of sorts, that theatre makers must put narratives at the forefront of their work in order to help communities consider social mobility and conversations around corrupt powers. All of the youth participants that participated in the memory workshop are currently working artists in the performative arts. They all, at the end of the workshop, commented that First Stage, and work like *Holes*, encouraged them to use their art to incite critical analysis on issues and power imbalances in society. While the specific groups they represent varied from gender to race to class, they agreed that they no longer adhere to art as purely entertainment. They believe art must comment and educate. First Stage's intent to produce work that inspires and ignites conversations around social justice and oppression has not only done just that, but has also directly reacted to Kushner (1997), Grotowski (1968) and Brook's (1968) desire to continue that narrative with a new generation of artists.

The one theme that I can not concretely connect from adult intent to youth reception is surrounding destiny and hope. Because the youth participants had varying opinions on the validity of this theme, I can not say that it was deeply felt and connected from the production to the audience. However, even though the youth participants questioned this theme, I would assess that some of the production staff were also critical of this narrative. Jeff, in particular, questioned what "hope, destiny, and luck" really are and whether they are powers outside our control or whether they are "fake" powers that we control ourselves. For this reason, the idea that the themes of destiny and hope were

critically analyzed by both the adult staff and the youth participants offers a variation on how the theme connected to audiences.

Observations on Communal Memory

Through my data sets, it is clear that communal memory recollection was far more successful than solely relying on individual interviews. Reason's (2006) ideas about "first alone, then together" rang true, as the participants were able to more readily pinpoint specific sensory memories from the 2004 production when they went through the play as a group. It was important, however, to include the individual interview first as a base for how to measure their memory collection. Reason (2006) and Kershaw (2011) encouraged me to conduct new and emerging methods for my research in order to expand the availability of understanding amongst my participants, and I believe because I integrated physical and arts-based emerging methods, I was able to gather more meaningful data. Utilizing the power of the group also touched on Bray and Chappel's (2005) call for theatre to critically consider how it can bring communities together around social issues. This research project, in and of itself, facilitated this idea and implored the staff at First Stage to similarly look more critically at their intentions in producing *Holes*.

Fantasy and Empathy

When I decided to use *Holes* and First Stage as my case study, I was not yet employed by the organization. Over the summer months of 2015, however, I became increasingly invested in the idea that the best thing theatre can do for young people is to encourage empathy. I taught over 300 students during my eight weeks with the company, and while the arts participation with my students was theatre-making, not theatre-viewing, along with my research in my literature review, I became hopeful that my interviews and workshops would reveal that *Holes* successfully employed tactics to help

audiences understand “the other.” I observed and researched theatre’s ability to help them empathize with all the characters in a complicated and discouraging issue within our community.

I asked my youth participants whether they would choose to see a realistic play around social and political themes or whether they would choose to see a fantasy play that may have those themes present, but are not focused on them. I similarly asked the adult staff at First Stage why they did not just commission a play about young boys of color that had been oppressed by the judicial system. Surely this narrative existed, so why not make that direct connection? In my undergraduate studies, I had a theatre directing professor that once said “sometimes, the message in a play hits you over the head like a hammer. Other times, it is a needle that is slowly inserted into your eyeball.” That idea has stuck with me as a theatre-maker, and has been more deeply understood through this research project. From adult staff to youth participants, it is clear that the best way to engage youth audiences in conversations around difficult social and political issues and the best way to help them understand all sides of that conversation, is through non-prescriptive fantasy.

Only three of my participants had any experience, in 2004, with law enforcement, and specifically with understanding the corruption of power in law enforcement. Not only did my other participants not experience corruption from law enforcement, they were not even aware it existed. Krasner (2010) advocates that a safe space in which any person can experience empathy is the key to enlisting possibilities rather than certainties. I stated earlier that Louis Sachar may not have known in 1999 that he was writing a narrative that would hauntingly comment on critical issues in Milwaukee in 2016, but if we have any sort of chance at talking about those issues, we must do so in a safe space. Blank and Jensen (2005) believe that when we associate ourselves with the characters and

experiences onstage, we stop viewing them as “others.” Returning again to the idea that many of my participants not only had no negative interactions with police in 2004 but knew few peers that fit into the characters represented in *Holes*, the 2004 production had the ability to represent all sides of the complicated issues surrounding race oppression. Whether or not *Holes* directly and overwhelmingly was the sole cause of my participants’ objective and open-minded attitude toward this issue, I believe it was crucial in their growth as socially-minded members of the Milwaukee community. Eleanor, the youth participant, said she remembered viewing *Holes* and not understanding the backgrounds of many of the characters. After she spent more time at First Stage, however, she made those connections, and was able to have deeper empathy toward their backgrounds.

While in 2016, with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the social media exposure to police brutality and problematic power dynamics, we are able to more critically consider the judicial system and whether it is truly serving our youth, that was not necessarily the case in 2004. It may not even currently be the case for youth today. We forget what it is like to be children, to only see what is in front of us. When we learn to engage with difficult conversations and topics as children in an open and empathetic way, however, we are more likely to carry those skills over to our conversations as adults.

Many of my participants noted that 2004 was an election year. We are currently, in 2016, in the middle of a presidential election cycle. During this election, particularly, our television and computer screens are littered with candidates who point fingers and make explosive remarks about those they deem as the “other.” American minorities, international immigrants, and women are a few of the groups marginalized by destructive rhetoric. Kenneth, a youth participant, said the meta connection of First Stage producing *Holes* 12 years apart is that it is almost a comment on, “have we learned nothing? We

were talking about this 12 years ago, these are still problems, let's wake up and pay attention."

It is important for theatre-makers to implore work that helps youth audiences empathize with the "other" and eventually help them to see all participants in a narrative not as "others" but as global and communal citizens. *Holes* helped a group of youth understand and consider a complex issue in Milwaukee around race and oppression in the judicial system. This is one story, and I wonder how my participants would have answered the same questions had they not been exposed to stories like *Holes* and other empathetic narratives in their youth.

Kenneth, in his interview spoke more on overarching issues within various systems as opposed to specific instances of injustice. He believes these instances only exist because the system is misguided. All of my participants, from the staff to the community participants, noted that it is impossible to produce *Holes* in 2016 without noticing its connection to social injustice and power imbalances in law enforcement. If this production was produced in Ferguson, Missouri, Florida, New York City, or various other communities in America, I believe those production teams and audiences would have similar reactions. That is not because Louis Sachar wrote *Holes* specifically about a solitary moment of injustice, it is because he crafted a representative, fantasy narrative that can be formed around moments of injustice in any community. His observations are around the problems in overarching systems in our country.

I analyzed the themes outlined in *Holes* as two separate themes: an individual coming-of-age story and a critical view of young men of color in the judicial system. The way Ivy connected these themes was very moving. She said that, yes, *Holes* was about injustice, and that connection was almost obvious. Like many of the participants, it is difficult to not make that connection. But beyond that, it is where "you lie on the scale of

injustice.” I was similarly moved by how open Ivy talked about her own privilege and how *Holes* challenged her to truly reconsider her place on this scale and then move forward with a new sense of communal identity.

Theatre has the ability to uncover these themes and incite conversations, but it also has the ability to make us look critically at how we are existing inside these narratives, if we even are existing in them at all, and if we are even acknowledging them. Fantasy meets us where we are ready to make those realizations. Bettelheim (1976) explained that fantasy, to children, is just as magical as real life experiences that most children have yet to experience. Being put in jail for a crime one did not commit, witnessing a shooting, and trying to survive in the desert without water; these are all struggles we can only hope the young people viewing *Holes* have not experienced. Being cursed by an old Latvian myth, being affected by objects falling from the sky, drinking a “magical” onion concoction in order to survive; these are, arguably, impossible experiences. To children, though, they are the same. The device of fantasy helps children know that it is acceptable to be uncomfortable with that which they do not know or understand. It creates a safe space for them to work towards that understanding and eventually empathize with all the “characters” in our shared community.

Chapter Six: *Conclusion*

In order to analyze the conclusions of this study, I will first outline overarching issues and concerns in community edification and political youth theatre. I will then narrow these issues to the problem statement which drove my study and the central research questions and sub-questions which guided my procedures. I will summarize my methods and approaches and reiterate the crucial outcomes from my research. I will identify and briefly discuss recommendations for future research in line with my findings and finish with my final conclusion.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Political and social themes in theatre for young audiences are often prohibitive topics for theatre companies and theatre practitioners. According to various theorists and researchers, political and social themes in theatre have been difficult topics for audiences of all ages (Boal, 1998; Bogart, 2014; Brook, 1968; Grotowski, 1968; Kushner, 1997; Rohd, 1998). Audience members are not interested in prescriptive messages and overt political directives, especially in an evolving technological culture where information and political opinions are increasingly present and intrusive. If a person is continuously bombarded with various forms of issue-based media, be that traditional or social, it is unlikely that they will also have the desire to be confronted with those same mechanisms when viewing or interacting with art. Epskamp (1989) criticizes this type of dramatic call-to-action and warns that if political theatre is used as “an instrument to serve the ‘revolutionary movement’, then political theatre is short-lived and has no depth” (p. 63).

Researchers and practitioners such as Bogart (2014) advocate for a more subtle attempt at breaching political and social themes in theatre. She describes how theatre should be a pebble in society that creates ripples, not waves, that audiences will be

confronted with but in a gentle and welcoming way. In practicing so delicately, however, theatre makers have often reacted by excluding political and social conversations in order to be non-confrontational to their audiences. Reason (2010) believes this reaction is connected to modern theatre makers misunderstanding of their audiences and their inability to craft difficult conversations in a gentle way.

Reason (2010) and his colleagues Kushner (1997), Bogart (2014) and Omasta (2011) believe, however, that although theatre makers attempt to shy away from political and social conversations, *everything*, in some context, is political and audiences will negate this exclusion and find the political in all things they view. Theatre makers can only benefit from this discovery through the intentional crafting of political and social themes in their work.

In moving to the more specific field of theatre for young audiences, researchers and theorists advocate for distinctive types of narratives to engage with children. Bettelheim (1976) and Pinsent (2002) explore the importance of fantasy and fairy tales for children. These narratives, they argue, allow for more open-ended interpretations and less prescriptive directives for all topics surrounding child development.

Aside from crafting emerging narratives in theatre, specifically for theatre for young audiences, a theatre company's ability, or inability, to be integrated in a community and serve all audiences equally plays a significant role in their ability to breach certain topics. Longo (2007) describes how theatre makers must be committed to cultivating audiences and communities in connection with their theatre over long periods of time. According to Longo (2007) as well as Bray and Chappel (2005), community edification and community integration is achieved through small and intentional steps. More critical researchers and theorists are not confident in modern companies' abilities to cultivate those relationships with their audiences (Klien, 2005).

Theatre, over the last two centuries, has acted in various facets for societies and communities. After the 1950s, the United States began to distrust theatre to comment on political and social topics because of its prescriptive and aggressive nature. Theatre makers, reactively, dialed down their messages by producing shows with arbitrary and, at times, shallow themes. As children's theatre became increasingly popular near the end of the 20th century, these companies similarly subscribed to the same surface-level themes and topics that adult theatre had comfortably settled into. These trends have been at the forefront of various critical researchers and theorists who call on theatre makers to change their practices and intentionally engage in difficult topics. They call on theatre makers to understand their duty and necessity to society to hold up a mirror, encourage progressive conversations, and not shy away from that which makes us uncomfortable.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

After reviewing pertinent literature about the climate of youth theatre and their varying degrees of considering political or social themes, I have narrowed down to a central problem facing the field of art education and theatre for young audiences. Theatre has a history, albeit distant history, of incentivizing communities to engage in open-minded and positive conversations around political and social controversy. Since the mid-1900s, however, these conversations have lessened and are currently rare or misguided in modern theatre practice. Currently, it is questionable whether theatre is serving communities or a necessity.

Youth theatre companies, in order to facilitate the conversations and actions they once served in society and communities, must intentionally craft narratives around controversial political and social topics. They should consider topics that are pertinent to

the communities they serve, represent multiple viewpoints, and are framed using fantasy elements.

Aside from the specificity of the story or narrative, theatre companies themselves must work to integrate into the community in which they are situated. They should recognize that this is a slow and often difficult process, and requires a cyclical process of listening, acting, listening, and reacting to the needs of their community.

If youth theatre companies are able to focus on these two elements, community integration and emerging narratives, they may be able to create more meaningful conversations and impacts on community members regarding controversial political and social topics. They may be able to facilitate youths' abilities to practice empathy amongst all actors in these political and social situations through understanding their own autonomy and positionality in the community.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION

How did the social and political themes in First Stage Children's Theater's 2004 production of *Holes* impact youth audiences in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? What can these impacts reveal about how theater as an educational tool stimulates conversations about community issues?

Sub-Question

To what extent was First Stage's decision to re-produce *Holes* in 2016 reflective of the social and political climate in Milwaukee over the past twelve years?

RESEARCH METHODS

For this research, I chose a qualitative single-embedded case study. As stated previously, First Stage has a long history of integration in the Milwaukee community. Because they were producing a play that touched on political and social topics specific to

the Milwaukee community, I believed studying the effects of their 2004 and 2016 productions would offer a holistic analysis of the actualized nature of their effects on Milwaukee youths.

In order to understand both the intended and actualized impacts of the 2004 production on Milwaukee youths, I utilized various methods for a case-study, both traditional and emerging. I began by conducting semi-structured interviews with First Stage staff affiliated with the 2004 and 2016 productions of *Holes*. I then analyzed their interviews and crafted interviews for 11 community participants who saw the show as youths in 2004 but are now adults in or around the Milwaukee area. I chose four of those community participants and furthered this area of data collection by facilitating a non-traditional memory workshop. I supplemented these data collection methods with secondary texts supplied by the theatre company as well as my own positionality as a teacher within the company during the summer of 2015.

I intentionally crafted the progress of my research methods in order to thoughtfully represent and authentically analyze the impacts of the production on the community. Skelton (2011) outlined the importance of researcher to truly look at the complexities of each participant and work to build a research project that represents each voice as irreproachable as possible. I felt compelled to move beyond the interview-only research design in many case studies in our field, currently, in order to understand the complex ways my participants understood and examined the themes in *Holes* and how those themes impacted their lives.

STUDY OUTCOMES

After coding and analyzing my data, I found two major areas where First Stage was able to impact Milwaukee youth. First, First Stage utilized its place and connection

to the community to open up more difficult conversations through challenging youth audiences to think more creatively and critically about the world around them. Then, they chose a play with a social justice and political theme that was and continues to be extremely pertinent to the Milwaukee community and carefully crafted a narrative that led youth audiences to think critically about the topic of that play.

Community Integration

According to First Stage founder Rob Goodman, community integration and connection was a cornerstone of creating a children's theatre back in 1987. After over 20 years of experience cultivating First Stage's relationship with the community, he, along with other staff, see this success grounded in three key components. First, they believe that a long-term commitment from their audiences to continue seeing plays and continue participating with the company facilitates their ability to gradually open their audiences up to political and social-based plays. Rob wants students and audiences to stay with the company for many years to be able to feel the full effects of how theatre can impact their creative and critical thinking skills. The community participants in this study corroborated these ideals and many of them attributed their creative thinking skills as adults to the longitudinal relationship they had with First Stage as youths.

Next, the staff talked about the importance of age-appropriate casting in order to facilitate stronger connections with their young audiences. Rob spoke about how students are more willing to listen when someone their age, or someone close to their age, is speaking on stage. Many of my community participants noted that as their relationship with the company grew, they began to notice faces on stage and sometimes chose to see a play because a friend, acquaintance, or actor they liked was in the production. I noted, in Chapter 4, that it is important to be critical of this data. Are these audiences only

attending play in order to support specific actors or friends of theirs? When they attend are they truly open to the messages of the plays? I concluded that the reason many of these audiences attend the play is not *solely* because of a specific actor or friend, and may be a mere contributing factor. As long as First Stage is crafting thoughtful narratives, those messages should permeate regardless of the relationships between actors and audiences.

Finally, First Stage's ability to create lasting and meaningful relationships with its audiences is founded in the company's ability to cultivate child development and critical thinking. The theatre company is based not solely on making entertaining plays, as the motto of First Stage is "Life Skills Through Stage Skills." Rob was clear, from day one, that the company was interested, yet never obsessed, with making "good plays." While artistry and aesthetic are can act as a tool to promote the more underlying messages of the productions they produce, unless the plays have those messages and themes in the first place, they are only surface-level. Many of the staff were open that they needed to choose plays that would sell tickets. They were also adamant that those plays needed to have substance. While the entire season isn't filled with plays that touch so directly on social or political issues within the community, such as *Holes*, they shy away from work that doesn't help students effectively utilize their creative and critical thinking skills. First Stage was also able to facilitate these skills because they created a space of diversity that echoed the community outside of its own walls.

Crafting a Political and Social Narrative

When considering *Holes*, specifically, I found it important to outline first the general methods the theatre companies used to connect with the community, which I have outlined above. Next, I will focus on the methods First Stage used in order to guide their

audiences through a critical analysis of young men suffering injustice from law enforcement in Milwaukee.

A main approach First Stage tended to, and continues to, focus on for all their productions is how the messages can connect to individuals. Beyond age appropriate casting, which we learned that a young person is more willing to listen and connect with ideas of someone their own age, First Stage chose *Holes* because there are so many voices represented. Few of the staff had one character they felt impacted the story, they often cited multiple characters or relationships. The staff spoke about meeting children where they are, and if one character at one time speaks to a certain member of the audience, that could be the foot in the door for them to open their minds to the motives and ideas behind other characters. The staff felt that if an audience member could identify with one character, they would trust themselves, possibly, to consider whether or not they identify with other characters and why.

Many of the staff specifically indicated the characters of Stanley and Zero and how they would work to propagate their relationship. These two characters, while seemingly different and from vastly separate backgrounds, work to find common ground and become friends. The staff and the community participants believed that this friendship was a representation of the main theme of the play, that we need to work harder as a society to stop seeing the “other” as an “other” and to begin to see them as our neighbors and friends.

The staff and the community participants also both spoke to the idea that once we are able to situate ourselves in the narrative of *Holes* we are more successfully and presently able to understand how we connect or act in similar situations in our everyday lives. The staff mentioned that for some of the students in the audience, the story on stage would be more of a reality than for others. This idea corroborated with my community

participants who noted that *Holes*, for some, was their first experience seeing people in that situation. For other community members, it was a narrative they were familiar with. By understanding their “current” place and seeing how that fits into a larger narrative with various voices encouraged the audience members to look critically at how they leverage their relationships and conversations in the community to work towards equality.

The final method the theatre company successfully used in order to inspire their audiences to think critically about social justice and law enforcement was that they highlighted the fantasy within the play instead of purely focusing on the realistic. The story, before it was even a play, wove an intricate story of fantasy and realism, past and present. First Stage harnessed this device so audience members could make connections to the larger themes and ideas as they became ready. The staff and many of the community members indicated that they preferred fantasy to realism because messages laced with fantasy were less prescriptive. As children grow, their abilities to think and make decisions for themselves becomes increasingly important, especially around topics of social and political controversy.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this section, I will outline possible areas of future research in both the broader spectrum of youth theatre and social justice and politics as well as more specific ideas for the work First Stage has done and continues to promote in the Milwaukee community.

While this research project was focused first and foremost on impacts of First Stage’s production of *Holes* on youth in Milwaukee, I was also interested in exploring new and emerging methods in art education research and how those methods successfully or unsuccessfully represented my participants. Generally, I was pleased with the

creativity employed during the group workshop, however, I encourage other art education researchers to further explore these creative and arts-based methods. Artists view the world through such a specific lens, and much like researchers, feel a very serious responsibility to how they are interpreting and representing the world around them. I think we are equally as responsible to progress the creative approaches through which we employ our research, and I hope artist researchers will consider emerging methods in the future.

I was fortunate to research a theatre company that successfully cultivated a positive relationship with the community and produced a play that delicately, yet profoundly, touched on a social justice issue in the community. I encourage future researchers, however, to find both successful and unsuccessful companies that are doing similar work, in order to not only understand the successes, but also the challenges and possible failures of how theatre impacts youth. Many theorists and practitioners I discussed in my literature review harped on how theatre companies, and youth theatre companies, shy away from meaningful material. I would be interested in research as to the specifics of this oversight and how those lapses negatively affect communities.

In looking explicitly at First Stage and their mission through *Holes*, I would be interested in how the different messages of the production affected different communities in Milwaukee. The First Stage education department has seen tremendous growth in the past 12 years, and I would be interested if the conversations and lessons in public schools, private schools, community centers, or at the theatre academy were taught differently or similarly. In my study, the focus was on audience members from various backgrounds and how the intangible conversations and messages of the show affected their lives. Some of the messages and themes were taught to students in a more prescriptive and thoughtful way in classrooms and through other programming. Were the

messages and themes the same? Were they as meaningfully connected to the students and audiences every day lives?

Finally, I would be interested, 12 years from now, in conducting a similar study with youth who saw the production in 2016, and how the themes and values from the narrative First Stage crafted affects their lives over the next twelve years. In what could be a powerful and meaningful longitudinal, follow-up study, theatre educators could learn how the next cycle of audiences similarly or differently understood the ideas in *Holes*. This study should include both interviews with the staff, interviews with community members, research and analysis on the political climate of Milwaukee from now until 2028, and further, how those results compare to the results of this study.

CONCLUSION

When considering possibilities for future research, a study 12 years from today, in 2016, would be a logical progression. I would hope, however, that such a study would be unnecessary because ideally by 2028, our country and the city of Milwaukee will no longer face the social or political issues I have discussed. When the community participant Kenneth noted that doing *Holes* again in 2016 is almost a subconscious comment on the fact that our society has learned nothing and *needs* this message again, he was outlining a bigger point that while theatre can exist to reflect the social and political climates of communities, it is only essential if the conversations lead to, in some way, positive change.

How do we consider the long-lasting effects of theatre on communities? Is that even possible? When researchers strive to make extremely direct connections between art and societal change, I believe they are often discouraged. As a researcher and an artist, a large reason I embarked on this research study was because I am reflective about whether

or not the work I do and the work of those around me is essential. Why is theatre essential? Why is theatre for young audiences essential? Why is theatre for young audiences essential to communities? Many of the practitioners I summarized in Chapter 2 discuss the problematic belief that theatre no longer serves a purpose to society. If this is true, it is a reality dangerous to both theatre makers and communities.

Memories can, in and of themselves, be prisons. Our experiences and how we reflect on those experiences can lead us to ways of thinking that, much like the boys at Camp Green Lake, direct us to become complacent with how we arrived there in the first place. It is important to remember that confronting our past experiences must also be accompanied by a critical investigation into how those experiences have shaped our ideas of reality and others in our society. Stories like *Holes* not only break down all of the components that lead to corruption in the juvenile correctional system, they also support our curiosity as to how these systems became so corrupt in the first place and how that may or may not contradict our previous understandings of these systems altogether. Children's theatre that pushes these boundaries enables us to break out of these mind-based prisons, constructed by our own reality and experiences, and appreciate and empathize with the experiences and journeys encountered by all of those in our community.

One of my participants was critical that conversations are not action. If theatre or art has the ability to incite meaningful dialogue, then should it also encourage meaningful action? Stories like *Holes* told by theatre companies like First Stage do not provoke direct action against those that inflict injustice. Instead, they encourage us, as individuals, to consider our experiences and resulting positionality and opinions from those experiences. If we can be more mindful of ourselves, we can be more mindful of others. If we are more mindful of others, they stop becoming others and we begin to function as a unified

society. There are no longer the individual characters of Stanley and Zero, but instead the representation of their allied friendship, working toward a greater good. If we, as a society, can advance in this way, our actions will be our empathy.

Theatre for young audiences has the ability to help us practice this empathy through seeing, understanding, criticizing, and ultimately accepting various viewpoints of a situation. These theatres can serve as a refuge for children that are confused or disconcerted with the world around them. They can craft narratives, through fantasy, that empower them to confront topics they may not understand. Once they confront those issues, they can begin to think critically about how they fit into those stories, how they affect those stories, and what they can do to change those stories. The community participants I interviewed grew up to be productive, confident, inspiring members of society. Imagine a society where everyone possesses those characteristics. If theatre for young audiences empowers its audiences to develop those attributes, it is undeniably essential.

Appendix A: Interview Questions with Artistic and Stage Director, Jeff Frank

1. Tell me briefly about your involvement and history with First Stage.
2. What was the process like for deciding on *Holes* for the 2004 season?
3. As the director, did you read the book or just focus on the adapted play?
4. What is *Holes* about, for you? Can you refine that into one sentence?
5. Why is this an important message for First Stage?
6. Why is this an important message for the Milwaukee Community?
7. Thinking back, did the main themes of the story change for you at all during the rehearsal process?
8. Do you remember any specific moments of insight? Either where an idea changed or was reinforced by the theatre artists in the rehearsal room?
9. You talked about what *Holes* was about for you, so why not just write or produce a play with those ideas but make them specific to the Milwaukee community?
10. Moving on to the production, did you ever attend a performance when there were a significant amount of children in the audience?
11. Do you remember any specific reactions or moments from an audience, or even a specific audience member?
12. Why are you producing *Holes* again this year? Is the message the same in 2016 as it was in 2004?
13. (If needed) *Holes* hits on ideas of questioning power, specifically amongst young men in juvenile detention. Looking at the landscape not just in Milwaukee but America currently about how we are questioning power, specifically in the judicial system, do you foresee that intentionally or unintentionally being a part of the conversation?

14. Who is your favorite character and why?

**Appendix B: Interview Questions with Education Director,
Julia Magnasco**

1. Tell me briefly about your involvement and history with First Stage.
2. In what capacity, if any, were you involved with the 2004 show?
3. Looking forward to next year, have you read the novel?
4. What is *Holes* about, for you? Can you refine that into one sentence?
5. Why is this an important message for First Stage?
6. Why is this an important message for the Milwaukee Community?
7. You talked about what *Holes* was about for you, so why not just write or produce a play with those ideas but make them specific to the Milwaukee community?
8. Through education programming, do you plan on making any of those specific connections to stories or individuals in Milwaukee?
9. How do you anticipate audiences and school groups will react to the show today, in 2016? Is the programming any different than it might have been a little over a year ago?
10. Why are you producing *Holes* again this year? Is the message the same in 2015 as it was in 2004?
11. (If needed) *Holes* hits on ideas of questioning power, specifically amongst young men in juvenile detention. Looking at the landscape not just in Milwaukee but America currently about how we are questioning power, specifically in the judicial system, do you foresee that intentionally or unintentionally being a part of the conversation?
12. Who is your favorite character and why?

**Appendix C: Interview Questions with Dramaturg,
Sheri Williams Pannell**

1. Tell me briefly about your involvement and history with First Stage. What about your involvement with *Holes*, past and present?
2. Have you read the novel or just the adapted play?
3. What is *Holes* about, for you? Can you refine that into one sentence?
4. As an educator, why is this an important message for First Stage?
5. Why is this an important message for the Milwaukee Community?
6. What type of role do you play in programming for the education department?
7. Is there a specific theme or idea that you feel is important to include in programming for the upcoming year?
 - a. Is that different from when this play was produced with First Stage in 2004?
8. How do you anticipate audiences will react to the show today, in 2016? Is the programming any different than it might have been a little over a year ago?
9. Why is it important to produce *Holes* again this year? Is the message the same in 2016 as it was in 2004?
10. (If needed) *Holes* hits on ideas of questioning power, specifically amongst young men in juvenile detention. Looking at the landscape not just in Milwaukee but America currently about how we are questioning power, specifically in the judicial system, do you foresee that intentionally or unintentionally being a part of the conversation?
11. Who is your favorite character and why?

Appendix D: Interview Questions with Founder, Rob Goodman

1. Tell me briefly about your involvement and history with First Stage.
2. What was the process like for deciding on *Holes* for the 2004 season?
3. As the Artistic Director at the time, did you read the book or just focus on the adapted play?
4. What is *Holes* about, for you? Can you refine that into one sentence?
5. Why is this an important message for First Stage?
6. Why is this an important message for the Milwaukee Community?
7. Do you remember any specific moments of insight? Either where an idea changed or was reinforced by the theater artists in the rehearsal room?
8. You talked about what *Holes* was about for you, so why not just write or produce a play with those ideas but make them specific to the Milwaukee community?
9. Moving on to the production, did you ever attend a performance when there were a significant amount of children in the audience?
10. Do you remember any specific reactions or moments from an audience, or even a specific audience member?
11. Why are you producing *Holes* again this year? Is the message the same in 2016 as it was in 2004?
12. (If needed) *Holes* hits on ideas of questioning power, specifically amongst young men in juvenile detention. Looking at the landscape not just in Milwaukee but America currently about how we are questioning power, specifically in the judicial system, do you foresee that intentionally or unintentionally being a part of the conversation?
13. Who is your favorite character and why?

Appendix E: Interview Questions with Community Participants

1. Talk first about yourself and your connection to theatre and the arts growing up.
2. What is your connection to theatre and the arts now?
3. Were political or social issues a topic of conversation in your home as a child? Which ones in particular?
4. You saw *Holes* in 2004 at First Stage?
 - a. Answer these on a scale of 1-10
 - i. I remember the theater/venue
 - ii. I remember the actors or performers
 - iii. I remember specific characters
 - iv. I remember visual aesthetics from the production
 - v. I knew about the story/plot of *Holes* before seeing the production
5. Who brought you to see the play?
6. Do you remember talking with them about the play after?
7. Growing up, did you have any sort of relationship to police or law enforcement?
8. Would you say your view of law enforcement growing up was similar or dissimilar to popular opinion?
9. Would you talk about your opinions today and if they have shifted?
10. How do you see this opinion being represented today, publically?
11. Do you consider yourself and artist?
12. Do you feel responsible to touch on what's happening in society today through your art or other work? If so, how?
13. Looking back to *Holes* in 2004, and *Holes* in 2016, do you think this narrative is important to the Milwaukee community?

14. Can you discuss the important of theatre for young audiences to touch on political or social issues? Were you, and are you now, more connected to fantasy narratives or more realistic work?

Appendix F: Interview Questions with Community Participants (Memory Workshop)

1. Talk first about yourself and your connection to theatre and the arts growing up.
2. What is your connection to theatre and the arts now?
3. Were political or social issues a topic of conversation in your home as a child? Which ones in particular?
4. You saw *Holes* in 2004 at First Stage?
 - a. Answer these on a scale of 1-10
 - i. I remember the theater/venue
 - ii. I remember the actors or performers
 - iii. I remember specific characters
 - iv. I remember visual aesthetics from the production
 - v. I knew about the story/plot of *Holes* before seeing the production
5. Who brought you to see the play?
6. Do you remember talking with them about the play after?
7. Growing up, did you have any sort of relationship to police or law enforcement?
8. Would you say your view of law enforcement growing up was similar or dissimilar to popular opinion?
9. Would you talk about your opinions today and if they have shifted?
10. How do you see this opinion being represented today, publically?
11. Do you consider yourself an artist?
12. Do you feel responsible to touch on what's happening in society today through your art or other work? If so, how?
13. Looking back to *Holes* in 2004, and *Holes* in 2016, do you think this narrative is important to the Milwaukee community?

14. Can you discuss the important of theatre for young audiences to touch on political or social issues? Were you, and are you now, more connected to fantasy narratives or more realistic work?
15. What is *Holes* about for you?

Appendix G: IRB Approval Letter



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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FWA # 00002030

Date: 07/02/15

PI: Christopher O Adejumo

Dept: Art/Art History

Title: Digging Holes: Milwaukee Youth's Response to Socially and
Politically Driven Theater

Re: IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2015-06-0028

Dear Christopher O Adejumo:

Recognition of Exempt status based on 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Qualifying Period: 07/02/2015 to 07/01/2018. *Expires 12 a.m. [midnight] of this date.*
A continuing review report must be submitted in three years if the research is ongoing.

Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:

Research that is determined to be Exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review is not exempt from ensuring protection of human subjects. The Principal Investigator (PI) is responsible for the following throughout the conduct of the research study:

1. Assuring that all investigators and co-principal investigators are trained in the ethical principles, relevant federal regulations, and institutional policies governing human subject research.
2. Disclosing to the subjects that the activities involve research and that participation is voluntary during the informed consent process.
3. Providing subjects with pertinent information (e.g., risks and benefits, contact information for investigators and ORS) and ensuring that human subjects will voluntarily consent to participate in the research when appropriate (e.g., surveys, interviews).
4. Assuring the subjects will be selected equitably, so that the risks and benefits of the research are justly distributed.
5. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any information or unanticipated problems that may increase the risk to the subjects and cause the category of review to be reclassified to expedited or full board review.

Appendix G: IRB Approval Letter (continued)

Re: IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol Number 2015-06-0028

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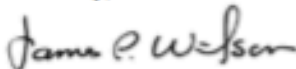
6. Assuring that the IRB will be immediately informed of any complaints from subjects regarding their risks and benefits.
7. Assuring that the privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the research data will be maintained appropriately to ensure minimal risks to subjects.
8. Reporting, by submission of an amendment request, any changes in the research study that alter the level of risk to subjects.

These criteria are specified in the PI Assurance Statement that was signed before determination of exempt status was granted. The PI's signature acknowledges that they understand and accept these conditions. Refer to the Office of Research Support (ORS) website www.utexas.edu/irb for specific information on training, voluntary informed consent, privacy, and how to notify the IRB of unanticipated problems.

1. Closure: Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the ORS.
2. Unanticipated Problems: Any unanticipated problems or complaints must be reported to the IRB/ORS immediately. Further information concerning unanticipated problems can be found in the IRB Policies and Procedure Manual.
3. Continuing Review: A Continuing Review Report must be submitted if the study will continue beyond the three year qualifying period.
4. Amendments: Modifications that affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as an amendment. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB Program Coordinator(s) to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment. The IRB Program Coordinator(s) can help investigators determine if a formal amendment is necessary or if the modification does not require a formal amendment process.

If you have any questions contact the ORS by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,



James Wilson, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

Appendix H: First Stage Site Letter

June 8, 2015

Dr. James Wilson, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board
P.O. Box 7426
Austin, TX 78713
irbchair@austin.utexas.edu

Dear Dr. Wilson:

The purpose of this letter is to grant Margaret Bridges, a graduate student researcher at the University of Texas at Austin permission to conduct research at First Stage Children's Theatre. The project, "*Digging Holes: Milwaukee Youth's Response to Socially and Politically Driven Theater*" entails interviewing staff members, teachers, and past students (nine total) during July and August in 2015. Interviews will last between 30 and 45 minutes and will be conducted at the First Stage offices. At this time, the artistic director, director of the stage production, and education director will be interviewed within First Stage's organization. Teachers and students are yet to be determined. These interviews will be crucial to the research project as they will offer insight into intent and outcomes of politicized social issues in youth theater in the Milwaukee community. First Stage Children's Theatre was selected because of its deep roots in the Milwaukee community and commitment to youth theater and civic education. First Stage's national reputation and successful history in the field of youth theater makes it an exemplary site for this case study. Margaret Bridges has been involved with

Appendix H: First Stage Site Letter (continued)

First Stage as a student, young performer, and teacher since 2003. First Stage will have access to any and all results published in accordance with this research, and, if desired, may use the data for fundraising, promotion, or development needs. I, Rob Goodman do hereby grant permission for Margaret Bridges to conduct “Digging *Holes*: Milwaukee Youth’s Response to Socially and Politically Driven Theater” at First Stage Children’s Theatre.

Sincerely,

Rob Goodman, Founder

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