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Undergrad Research: Review of AMS Senior Kelli Schultz’s Play, “Our TEKS”

by David

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Last Monday night, senior **Kelli Schultz** premiered her American Studies/Plan II honors thesis play titled, “**Our TEKS**,” to an eager and curious audience. The play was the culmination of a year’s worth of diligent and passionate research into the Texas textbook controversies in 2010 when the Texas State Board of Education drafted a list of over 100 amendments to the Social Studies curriculum for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Taking a critical and creative look into the historical hoopla and media coverage of the new standards, Kelli referred to her play as “*Our Town* meets *Barnum & Bailey* meets *The Colbert Report*.” As a form of documentary theater, it combined true accounts and reenactments from board room transcripts, interviews, video and audio clips, and even a surreal recreation of a Colbert Report segment with Alexandra Reynolds as the ever-vigilant Stephen Colbert.

Kelli began by providing a brief overview of what this is all about—policy, history, and memory—before introducing us to the 15 elected “experts” on the Texas State Board of Education. Each member was represented as a circus performer in silhouette, dazzling and dismaying the audience with their rhetoric and apparent expertise in the matters of K-12 standards for education in the departments of Language Arts, Science, Math, and Social Studies. There was the “strong man” Bob Craig; Barbara Cargill, unfurling a long cloth from her mouth as she spoke to the crowd; skilled-balancer Pat Hardy; Siamese twins, a cannon-ball man, a mime, a few clowns, and more. It was an ingenious way to represent the so-called “experts” administering these standards, only one of whom actually holds a degree in history and has experience teaching this information in the classroom. Two are ministers, four are professors, one is a dentist, and another holds no college degree at all.

From there, the play skillfully reinterpreted the influences that the Board has on Social Studies standards, not only in classrooms but in local and national textbooks as well. House Bill 2923, which adheres strongly to the U.S. Constitution’s Tenth Amendment, prohibits the use of the national standards over those of the state standards in Texas. Schools and educators either must acquiesce to the Board’s demands or face harsh consequences for not implementing the new changes in the classroom. In the play, the Board met to discuss their proposed changes, all the while blowing up balloon animals, blowing bubbles, playing with toys, and hopping sporadically from chair to chair in the board room, creating a dizzying effect for the observers.

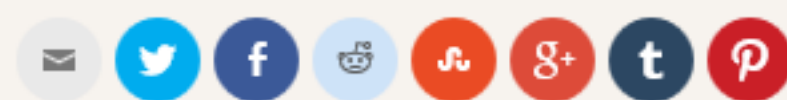
What was so fascinating is how deftly the play shifted tones from one scene to the next, bringing in laughs at one moment and silent, thoughtful reflection in another. One segment featured an interactive “historical celebrity” game, turning the spotlight onto the nervous and anxious audience, testing *their* knowledge of the 61 people deemed the “most important” in the social studies standards. Drawing a slip of paper with one these names on them from a cup, audience members had to provide the rest of the audience with enough clues to guess who it was, or, failing to do so, write the name on a chalkboard and stand in silent shame for 10 seconds in front of your peers. The audience laughed and cringed as names like William Jennings Bryan, Thurgood Marshall, and Dolores Huerta were added to the board of “forgotten” names.

Another scene featured a “five minute history of hip hop,” an important part of American culture that was removed from the current social studies standards. Chrissy Shackelford and Maki Borden rapped a list of prominent hip hop artists, including Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Master Flash, Tupac, Biggie, Snoop Dogg, Kanye West, and Jay-Z. It was both a great way to pay homage to late twentieth and early twenty-first century artists as well as “eulogize the death of hip hop” in the Texas standards.

For me, the most moving parts of the play were the three monologues by Salvadorian archbishop Oscar Romero, performed by Ben Bazan. Romero entered the play without fanfare or any direct acknowledgement of who he was, signifying the loss of his name and relevance to twentieth-century history due to the effects of these new standards. Kelli provided a nice twist on Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* as Romero demanded to know how he wound up in the graveyard of forgotten people, watched the Board meeting in which he is taken out of the standards, and dissolved into the numbing calm of absence in history. It was a poignant example of how these standards strive to create an adequate list of important people in our history while leaving dozens behind due to a lack of time or relevance on the STAR test (previously known as the TAKS).

As Kelli said after the show, we have to ask ourselves, “What if you were forgotten?” when facing the subjective subject of history and the political rhetoric of elected officials in determining who stays and who goes. The play stands as a symbol of the inadequacies and inefficiencies with the current system and standards, and begs the important question on everyone’s mind, “So, what do we do now?” History rests in our hands.

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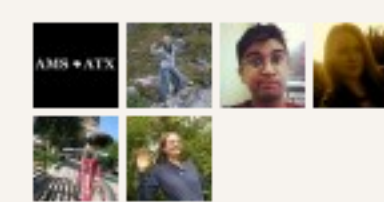
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