

# Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



## The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts Children's Theatre Company

### The Innovators

Founded in 1965, **Children's Theatre Company (CTC)** is recognized as one of the leading professional theatre companies for young people in North America and among the three largest in the world. Located in Minneapolis, CTC serves 200,000 young people and families annually in five key program areas: stage productions, new play development, community partnerships, theatre arts training, and a regional tour. CTC's operating budget in 2009 was \$10.7 million.

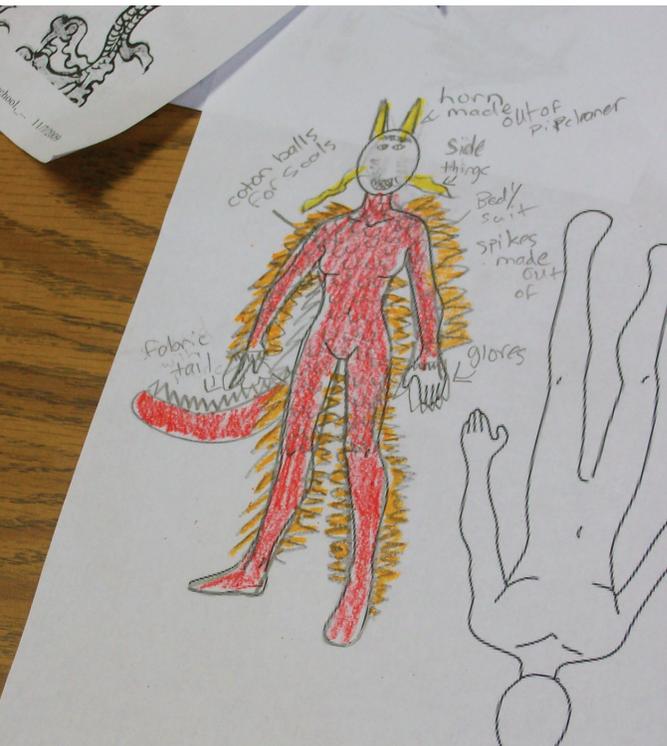


### The Innovation

CTC created *Kidcentricity*, an intensive program to change children from observers of theater productions to participants in theater-making. Through the program, young people work on all the elements of an artistic project: they visit CTC's stages and shops and participate in a series of learning modules, including writing and scene development, sets, lighting, costumes, and choreography.

### Starting Conditions

Like many other arts organizations, CTC was coming face-to-face with a new realization: performances alone were no longer enough to guarantee meaningful audience engagement. Admitting that its relationship with audiences was more transactional than relational – “people buy tickets and we show them a play” – CTC was excited by the lessons it saw emerging from more democratic social media. Still believing in its core mission to “create extraordinary theatre experiences that educate, challenge and inspire young people,” CTC began to focus its attention on what it meant by “theatre experience.” Was there, CTC asked, a way to expand the Company's own definition to involve its young audiences more effectively in the creative process? And would this involvement deepen their fascination and engagement with the art of theater and CTC's staged work? Thinking about how it might change its relationship with audiences – both by using social media and by empowering people in the physical space of the theatre – CTC turned to the Innovation Lab for help. It was accepted into the Lab in March 2009.



One student's imagined costume design for the character of Mushu in *Mulan*.

## The Lab

### Transformative Moments

CTC's journey in the Lab was a struggle. From the beginning, Lab facilitator Melissa Dibble saw internal problems of communication and trust that made it difficult for CTC even to assemble its Innovation Team. The organization experienced many staff changes throughout the process, and there were no artists on the Team except the Artistic Director – despite the fact that CTC is an ensemble theater. Having a team of staff, the Artistic Director, Board members and community members whom the Theatre didn't know very well inhibited conversation and made implementation difficult.

While the Innovation Team didn't turn any big corners in the Lab, individuals did make progress at pivotal moments. At the Intensive, Phil McArthur's session with the Team was one of those moments. McArthur led the group through a role-playing exercise in which they practiced enrolling artists back home in *Kidcentricity*. Some found this nearly impossible and simply could not "make the ask," according to Dibble.



Students from Highlands School in Edina, MN, explore stage lighting techniques.

McArthur's work with the group helped them understand their own limitations – inadequate listening skills, an inability to ask for help, and a lack of communication.

Executive Director Gabriella Calicchio says the Intensive was huge in helping CTC build better ways of working together. She cites the role-playing exercise as particularly useful in fostering stronger communication among Team members and CTC's leadership. Teacher and Team member Jamie Johansen says the Intensive was transformational for him, as high-achieving business professionals recognized his expertise and validated his beliefs about the value of educating children.

### Shifts in Assumptions

Coming into the Lab, CTC assumed it could best involve children through a series of possible activities before and after a production, including focus groups, commissioning work that incorporated their stories, convening youth advisory councils, forming reading groups, holding post-production dialogues and activities, and networking. As CTC progressed through the Lab, two things happened that changed the way people thought about these ideas. First, the team realized that the ideas weren't kid-centric enough to really change the relationship dynamic between the Theatre and its audience. They were good ideas for promoting knowledge and peripheral engagement, but one thing was missing – the ideas did not place kids at the center of the creative process in an authentic and powerful way. The second shift came

from the artists who assumed that bringing children into their creative process would somehow undermine the quality of the work. Once the artists understood that they were not turning the creative process (and the final product) over to the children, their resistance disappeared, and discussions of *Kidcentricity* became more focused, collaborative and purposeful.

### New Pathways to Mission

"Artists and kids know best," says CTC, and its values have always placed young people at the center of the organization's work. *Kidcentricity*, however, goes well beyond the Company's historic practice of developing new work specifically for children. No longer believing that it can engage children solely by creating plays for them, CTC has found a new pathway for deepening its relationships with its audience – not one that replaces previous practice, but rather enriches it and deepens its impact. How did the Company do this, and how did artists, teachers and students respond?

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### The Prototype

CTC piloted *Kidcentricity* in an open classroom of 56 children in grades one through five in Highlands Elementary School in Edina, Minnesota. Taught by Johansen and Julie Baker, the class participated in an intensive exploration of *Disney's Mulan, Jr.*, which was performed at CTC in Spring 2010.

As a first step, students toured CTC's stages and shops and read versions of the Chinese folk tale on which *Mulan* was based. In addition to the initial site visit, the prototype included five modules, each consisting of two classroom sessions with artists and artisans from CTC. One session focused on inquiry, soliciting students' solutions to a thematic or technical challenge, and the second on reflection, encouraging students to discuss their responses to the solutions they had proposed. Modules included writing and scene development, sets, costumes, choreography, and lighting. The content of each module was challenging, requiring advance preparation and full participation by students. For example, students prepared for a visit from Director David Mann by reading books about China, including the original poem *Fu Mulan*, and interviewing their families about the concept of honor. Mann began his session by reading three scenes from the story, and students worked in small groups to dramatize the scenes they thought were important. He followed with a series of questions for the students: What are the first five things you think of when you think of China? What assumptions do we make about boys and girls that are not true? What is worth fighting for? What does honor mean to you? Mann found the students' comments so useful that he "thought differently about directing after he visited them." The Team also said the students' interviews about honor helped CTC make important connections with parents.

### Obstacles and Enablers

Leading up to the prototyping, artists on the *Mulan* project team still hesitated, concerned about maintaining creative control of the production and worried about finding language to describe design and production that would be appropriate for children. Accustomed to working with college students, the artists doubted their ability to keep the attention of an audience of elementary school students. Classroom teachers were instrumental in helping artists overcome their reservations. Using the Dewey model of inquiry – ask questions, build something, reflect and ask questions again, and improve the design –

teachers mirrored the prototyping process and helped artists ask substantive questions that invited students into the design process. When technical director Adriane Heflin told students about her degrees in architecture and stagecraft, adding that as a child she had enjoyed playing with Legos, one student said, "I play with Legos. I could be a technical director."

In the end, CTC's artists were won over by the teachers and the students. Unencumbered by habit, students proved to be creative free thinkers whose feedback kept designers from falling into conventional design approaches and whose enthusiastic participation reminded artists that making

work for children was a joyous calling. Costume designer Rich Hamson integrated students' ideas into his sketches, and Mann says that students helped him shape his ideas about gender in the production. Girls, in particular, objected to Disney's portrayal of the heroine *Mulan*, who loses her masculine disguise accidentally in the film. In earlier versions of the story, *Mulan* chooses when to drop her disguise, and students thought the Disney film robbed *Mulan* of the self-determination she had fought for during the story.

The group dynamic among teachers, students and artists made the classroom prototyping a "brilliant success," according to Dibble. Within CTC, however, a number of problems continued to plague the innovation process itself: ongoing financial problems, continuing breakdowns in communication among organizational leaders, and a lack of human and technical resources. These problems manifested themselves especially as CTC tried to develop a *Kidcentricity* web microsite that was to be prototyped securely with a specific school. Believing that technology would be the key to bringing the prototype to scale, CTC hired a technical consultant whose style in the end did not fit the organization's culture; because he was hired without full organizational vetting, he never established the relationships necessary within the organization to be successful. CTC did not have a staff member nor cross-departmental buy-in devoted to developing dynamic and changing web content that would entice students to become habitual users, existing server capacity was insufficient, and artists lacked experience in using interactive websites. "It took a lot of prodding," says Dibble, "to get artists

to participate and add content to the website.” While CTC did launch the electronic classroom component for *Mulan*, it is uncertain whether the Company will be able to maintain the vigorous, ever-changing content the students demand.

Because of the obstacles CTC encountered in bringing the website to scale, its prototyping effort failed to answer an important question: could CTC engage students effectively and authentically if *Kidcentricity* content were accessible completely or mostly online? Understanding this question is important if CTC hopes bring this concept to large enough scale to make the investment of staff time and financial resources sustainable and then to distribute practices to the larger theater and education community. Further prototyping is necessary to explore the potential of the online component.

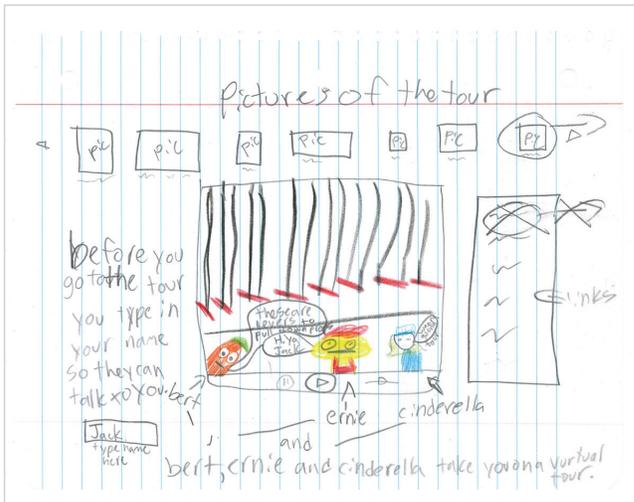
## The Impact

How is it that the artistic project was so successful despite weaknesses within the organization? Dibble says there are two reasons for this: first, the project was organic to CTC’s core mission and involved its primary constituents – artists and students – in collaborative ways that enrich that mission; second, CTC piloted *Kidcentricity* in a classroom that already had strong relationships among principals, teachers, students and parents, and in a school that values arts education. The challenge CTC faces now is how to take *Kidcentricity* into a school that does not have the same capacity, will, interest, or commitment. Whether the project has lasting impact will depend on if CTC – given its financial challenges – can improve its internal communication and summon the shared institutional will to develop new content, technical interest, and expertise, to establish new partnerships, and to raise the resources it needs to scale-up *Kidcentricity* to a level that ensures lasting impact on the organization and the audience.

Apparent challenges aside, *Kidcentricity* has had a major impact on CTC, and the lessons are transferable to other organizations that serve young people. CTC and participating artists have learned how children of different ages think and work. Teachers and artists describe significant impact on students, particularly those who have not found a niche in academics, sports or music, and they cite numerous examples of engagement and transformation among students: the shy girl who became fascinated with costume design and volunteered to show her sketches to the class, the boy who sparked a rich conversation by challenging Hamson’s costume designs, and the students who brought their parents to *Cinderella*, proudly pointing out how the sets, lights and costumes worked. Parents, says Dibble, “were blown away by what the kids were saying at home.” The project’s greatest impact, says CTC is that students felt free to challenge the artists as fully engaged partners in the creative process, and that artists were comfortable enough to receive student questions and criticism, engaging with them honestly and openly on their own level.

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All artwork courtesy Children’s Theatre Company.



A student’s design for CTC’s website

### The Innovation Team

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