

Children of War Highlights the Suffering of Refugee Children

The Center for Multicultural Human Services, a center devoted to treating refugee trauma, and a member of the National Network for Child Traumatic Stress, recently presented “Children of War,” a play written by renowned playwright Ping Chong, and based on the narratives of five child war refugees who also comprise the cast for the play. The children who are all in their teens, come from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Iraq, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. An empty chair appears on stage for the anonymous sixth child, a victim of gang violence in the United States. The chair is empty because no gang member (or former member) felt safe coming forward to recount his experiences.

Dareen Pasha, an adolescent from Iraq, recounts the story of what happened when he was four and witnessed the assassination of his own father. Yarvin Cuchilla from El Salvador suffered socioeconomic deprivation and then abuse at the hands of her own mother, who had been abused as a child herself. Awa Nur came so close to death in Somalia that by the age of 15 she was compelled to write a poem which she recites at the end of the play and which contains these lines: “Woe am I, faced with the horror of death./The nothingness, the loneliness, the emptiness, and/the easy forgetfulness of people soon after.”

Playwright Ping Chong, who has created an ongoing series of theatrical works based on the oral histories of immigrants, conceptualized “Children of War” as a “chorale” in which the children’s voices and stories are interwoven, to form a tapestry of words – some from the refugees’ native languages, most in English – and of histories. Each child’s story is told by all of the children on stage. The overarching structure of the play is chronological, so that the children place their stories in a larger chronological web. They tell some of the histories of their countries as well as their personal histories. According to Chong, each child gained strength from hearing his or her story voiced by others, and by the power of all their stories together comprising a kind of cathartic art.

Asked how he came to write plays about displaced persons, Chong explains that his parents immigrated here from China and never spoke a word of English. “I know what the immigrant story is, and I certainly know what it means to be Other in this country,” he says. “It’s allowed me to give voice to so many people who have no voice in this country.” For Chong, the play is “about witnessing, about testimonials of displaced persons, about each person being a vessel of history, about the details of history that you rarely get in history books, about what identity means, about what is home, what is identity.”

One purpose of the play, according to Dennis Hunt, PhD, Director of the Center for Multicultural Human Services that produced it, is to educate the public about the far-reaching impact of war on children’s lives. “People continually downplay the effects of war on children,” says Hunt. As a therapist dedicated to treating the far-ranging effects of war and violence on refugee children, Hunt cannot participate in this denial.

The testimonies that the children of war provide about their own experiences may function therapeutically as well as artistically. Trauma therapists have found that telling or writing a trauma narrative, formulating the story of one’s experiences and somehow integrating that story into the larger frame of one’s life, can be a crucial element in healing. Glenn Saxe, MD, Director of the Center for Medical and Refugee Trauma at the Boston University School of Medicine, explains that “People want to create something, some meaning out of their experience, which involves helping other people, which involves creating a kind of shared meaning.”

“Children of War” functions to create just such a shared meaning. Dennis Hunt elaborates, “In a way, this play does serve a therapeutic end to the extent that it works as a kind of testimony. One of the principles in treating trauma is for individuals to pull a very frightening, fragmented memory of things together into a coherent story and then have others witness that story as a past event that happened. This has a very powerful impact because the trauma becomes something that happened, not something you continue to carry around in fragments that disturbs your day-to-day functioning.” “Children of War” creates a coherent and very moving montage of stories and turns its audience into empathetic witnesses in the process.

Along with the five children who bear testimony, CMHS therapist Farinaz Amirsehi recounts her own story of imprisonment in Iran and exile to the United States. She explains how experiencing trauma shaped her desire to be a therapist and to bear witness to others.

“Children of War” was co-produced by the Theater of the First Amendment and performed at TheaterSpace, George Mason University Center for the Arts, on December 5-December 15, 2002. Dennis Hunt and Ping Chong would like to see the play be produced with different casts in different communities, and also travel to schools so that students would have an opportunity to see it. “Maybe,” Dennis Hunt suggests, “if children saw it, it would help to diminish the cruelty that refugee children endure.”