

IMMIGRANT ASSIMILATION THROUGH THEATRE

Grace Anastasiadis

Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Goucher College in partial
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Abstract

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This major paper will examine how theatre education and participation can assist immigrants who choose to assimilate into their new culture, do so more effectively. The paper defines assimilation as a mutual process whereby the immigrant and host society both change culturally and meet in the middle. There are several factors that aid in immigrant assimilation: language acquisition, customs, culture, self-confidence, contact with native-born, attendance at social clubs or institutions of the host society, and dress. The paper ties these aspects to how theatre can assist immigrants achieve assimilation through them.

Theatre can teach immigrants about the culture of the United States, and it can also teach Americans about other cultures, thereby raising mutual awareness, helping each to become more accepting of others, and teaching the native-born to empathize with an immigrant's struggle, all while celebrating the differences among cultures.

Research consisted of historical data on immigrants and assimilation, and interviews with leaders in the field of theatre, theatre history, immigration, sociology and policy. Journals in the fields of social science and psychology were used to demonstrate how theatre assists immigrants with aspects of assimilation. Books on the history of immigration were consulted in addition to secondary data on how theatre can assist in assimilation. Web searches proved useful in supplying population data and history of immigration population of the US. Articles on how theatre has helped immigrants in addition to periodicals on immigrants, immigration, and theatre were consulted. Lastly, interviews with theatre companies currently using theatre to assist immigrants in assimilation were conducted. The conclusion suggests how theatre arts administrators can use this information to make theatre more relevant to immigrants, design a program geared toward them and possible next steps for their theatre's program.

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PREFACE

As an immigrant who came to the United States in adulthood for the purpose of studying theatre, I thought this major paper subject would be of great importance to arts administrators, theatres, other immigrants and me specifically. Without consciously realizing it, I was assisted in my assimilation and inclusion into American society by my theatre experience, which made my life in a new country easier.

The struggles of language acquisition as well as understanding American culture and customs were and still sometimes are very prevalent in my everyday life. Even though I have mostly assimilated, researching and finding proof of that process was very personal to me and sometimes difficult to separate myself from. As one can imagine, being able to achieve the completion of this paper in the English language has been many things: cathartic, informative, difficult and ultimately, fulfilling. It has also enabled me to think systematically, and better understand and analyze my assimilation more closely.

I hope this work will enable theatres to be more conscientious in providing immigrants what they need to make America an accepting home for themselves and I hope other immigrants will be able to see that there are different ways to achieve assimilation, theatre being a fun and interesting one.

This paper is dedicated to the Goucher College's Master of Arts in Arts Administration faculty, and especially the readers' committee, for challenging me and making me a better thinker and writer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction:	Introduction	1
	Facts, Defining Concepts and Setting Boundaries	2
Chapter I:	HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION AND GOVERNMENT ASSIMILATION	8
	History of Immigration	8
	Tensions Between Policy and Reality	10
	Forced Assimilation Does Not Work	12
Chapter II:	ASPECTS OF ASSIMILATION: HOW DOES THEATRE FITS IN	15
	What Constitutes Assimilation	15
	How Do these Aspects of Assimilation Tie In to Theatre	18
	Language Acquisition	18
	Customs	22
	Culture	22
	Self-Confidence	24
	Contact with Native-Born	26
	Clubs or Institutions of Host Society	27
	Dress	29
Chapter III:	THEATRE EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION USED TO ASSIST IMMIGRANTS WITH ASSIMILATION	30
	Why the Use of Theatre	30
	Theatre is Being Used to Help with Assimilation Today	34
	Theatre Has Been Used for Assimilation In the Past	37
	What Other American Groups Are Doing To Help with Assimilation: How Can Theatre Help	41
Conclusion:	Conclusion	43
Works Cited:	Works Cited	47

Introduction

America is a nation of immigrants. Immigrants are facing increased scrutiny in their day-to-day lives and livelihoods from the government and the public in general. Arts administrators are more prone to value ideals like equity, diversity and inclusion, and might want to utilize the arts to assist marginalized communities in addressing injustices. By nature, nonprofit arts administrators perform a public service and the people in this profession may be more empathetic and more prone to assisting underserved communities such as newcomers to the United States.

Some immigrants want to assimilate into their new culture but struggle with how to do so. Arts administrators are in a unique position to assist these segments of the community assimilate safely and happily by utilizing the arts and specifically theatre. Theatre teaches us about our world, current and past. There are plays about subjects from history to social justice, including social issues faced by immigrants today. The arts and arts administrators can facilitate natives and immigrants alike in the sharing and learning from each other's culture

through theatre. In tackling these topics of cultural understanding through theatre with a scene or play, immigrants can learn more about the cultures portrayed onstage. This sharing of culture benefits immigrants as they learn about the host society, and helps the host society as well since it aids in understanding the immigrants' point of view. Theatre education and participation assists immigrants who choose to assimilate into their new culture do so more effectively.

Successful assimilation requires knowing and understanding the language, customs, culture; having self-confidence, contact with native-born people; attending social clubs or institutions of the host society, and dress. Arts administrators are in a unique position to be able to provide theatre education and participation to help immigrants address these needs.

Facts, Defining Concepts and Setting Boundaries

According to an extensive study published in June of 2019, in 2017 there were over 44.4 million immigrants living in the US (Radford). Merriam-Webster defines an *immigrant* as, "a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence." Immigrants arrive in the US from many different countries and for many different reasons. An immigrant could be a victim of forcible displacement, a

refugee or an asylum seeker, an internally displaced person, a legal immigrant or a permanent resident alien, an expatriate, or an undocumented immigrant (Lent). For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter why an immigrant has come to the United States, but that they are here and are interested, consciously or subconsciously, in assimilating.

The concept of integration is closely related to assimilation and is sometimes used when speaking of immigrants. Even though the words are often used interchangeably, assimilation and integration have different cultural connotations. In today's American culture, integration implies leaving something of oneself behind, or negating one's primary culture. Integration implies that change is the sole responsibility of the immigrant with no accommodation by the host society. The focus of this paper is on assimilation, as it more accurately reflects American culture, constantly evolving and changing to accommodate new ideas.

Assimilation is defined in many ways and is constantly being redefined as the English language evolves. Because the word has different cultural connotations depending on the time-period, for the purposes of this paper assimilation will be viewed through a sociological lens. In "Making Americans: Schooling, Diversity, and Assimilation in the Twenty-First Century," sociologists define assimilation in several different, but non-conflicting ways. It is defined

as, “a process of ethnic change whereby ‘foreigners’ become nationals even as the characteristics of a national may change,” as a “bidirectional process of ethnic change experienced by both the host society and the immigrant community, leading to an overall decline of ethnic distinction,” and, as “a relational (or give and take) process of cultural change between the host society and immigrant community over time, ... [where] the host society has changed their understanding of American national identity as a consequence of long-term immigration” (Lash 101).

Tomás Jiménez, Stanford University associate professor of sociology, says it is “a process by which groups become more similar to each other” (“Assimilation”). This idea of assimilation, meaning that both immigrants and the host society are changing to accommodate each other, is at the core of the definition of assimilation in this paper.

In an interview with Jiménez, he explains there are two dimensions to assimilation; the economic and the cultural. The economic dimension is more easily defined; it is sharing in the same opportunities as nationals in economic advancement, such as access to jobs and education. Jiménez states that this importance of equal opportunity is a key value of American society. In this respect, Jiménez says that assimilation is calling for something that is at the core of American values.

The cultural side of assimilation focuses on cultural identity and the degree to which a culture clings to that identity at the exclusion of others, and the degree to which society includes or excludes certain cultures because it thinks they are unfit. He sees it as American society having competing notions of American identity; one side of the spectrum embraces new cultures and the other side is much more rooted in white nationalism. American immigrants should have the opportunity to bring who they are into the mainstream, and America, as a host society, should create space for this shift because only then will the host culture be able to evolve, progress and be more inclusive of its entire population (Jiménez).

Peter Skerry, Professor of Political Science at Boston College, adds social and political dimensions to the assimilation process. He states that assimilation is a journey, not a mutually agreed upon destination. To assimilate does not mean to arrive at a socially agreed upon state and does not only move forward but can go backwards as well ("Do We Really Want Immigrants"). The process can take generations, agrees Marketa Zubkova, Accredited Legal Representative for the Hispanic Affairs Project in Colorado, in an interview. Skerry adds that one of the first and most telling indicators of individual assimilation is intermarriage ("Do We Really Want Immigrants").

When asked whose responsibility it is to assist immigrants with assimilation, Jiménez responded that there is mutual responsibility; both immigrants and the host culture have the responsibility to assimilate, change, evolve and adapt to each other. Immigrants cannot be expected to leave everything cultural at the proverbial door and be the only ones adjusting. The host society must meet them part of the way.

All these definitions surround the concept that the existing culture is changing along with and due to other cultures being added to it. This definition of assimilation is one that we see manifesting in our daily lives. As immigrants learn a new language and ways of behaving, the host culture also evolves when it uses bi-lingual signage, offers drivers' license testing in different languages, or expands restaurant menus to include dishes and ingredients from other cultures.

Only assimilation in the US will be addressed, although some theatre education and participation research done for this paper might be applicable to other countries. America's culture is not only evolving but displays geographical differences. This paper will address the generality of American culture, how and why theatre education and participation can be of assistance to the assimilation process of immigrants and how this can be achieved most effectively.

Effectively will be defined as being able to fully understand the aspects of assimilation: language acquisition, customs, culture, self-confidence, contact with native-born, attendance at social clubs or institutions of the host society, and dress. The Cambridge Dictionary defines *effective* as, "producing the intended results, or (of a person) skilled or able to do something well." For the purposes of this paper, the grade of effectiveness will be measured by the degree of assimilation each immigrant wants to achieve through theatre education and participation, as some immigrants want to be fully assimilated, and some do not.

This paper will be primarily useful for arts administrators planning to use theatre education and participation to assist immigrants in assimilating; it may also be valuable for immigrants looking for tools to help them assimilate. The link between assimilation and theatre is powerful. Research in this paper will provide evidence of the effectiveness of theatre education and participation in aiding assimilation, thus providing theatres support for requests for grants or private donations, and providing immigrants another assimilation tool. Recent research findings may validate and lend credibility to the work that some theatres are already doing with immigrants. In order to fully understand and have context for these findings, one should understand the history of immigration.

Chapter I HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION AND GOVERNMENT ASSIMILATION

The federal government's responsibility is the creation of immigration policy, not assimilation policy; however, current federal policies are making it harder for immigrants to achieve legal immigration status, which seems to hinder assimilation. Legal status itself promotes assimilation and illegal status is one of the greatest impediments to assimilation states Jiménez ("Assimilation", min. 34). Immigrant counselor, Marketa Zubkova, agrees with this statement.

Immigrants today face complex policies that have sometimes been rewritten or are contradictory. Arts administrators who want to effectively serve immigrants might serve them better by understanding the evolution of immigrant legislation.

History of Immigration

In March of 1790, Congress passed the first law defining the granting of citizenship. The Naturalization Act of 1790 allowed "any free white person of 'good character,' who has been living in the

United States for two years or longer” to apply to be a citizen (“U.S. Immigration Timeline”). The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1917 established a literacy requirement for immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants allowed into the US annually. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Simpson-Mazzoli Act into law, which granted amnesty to more than three million immigrants who were living illegally in the US (“U.S. Immigration Timeline”). This “law also made it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented workers” (“Why Does the US”).

In 2001, a bill was proposed but did not pass that would have provided a way for Dreamers, undocumented immigrants brought to the US illegally by their parents as children, to achieve legal status. In 2012, President Barack Obama, signed the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which temporarily protected some Dreamers from deportation but did not provide a pathway to American citizenship. In 2017, President Donald Trump issued two executive orders, both titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” with the intent of stopping travel and immigration from six majority Muslim countries as well as Korea and Venezuela. These travel bans were challenged in state and federal courts. In April of 2018, the travel restrictions on one of the Muslim countries (Chad) was lifted. In June of 2018, the US Supreme Court

upheld the ban on the remaining seven countries (“U.S. Immigration Timeline”).

Understanding immigrants might be confused and frustrated with the process that will ultimately aid in their assimilation will help arts administrators in assisting immigrants more effectively.

Tensions Between Policy and Reality

Assimilation might be difficult if an immigrant does not feel they are wanted or appreciated for their contributions to American society. The tension between the language on the Statue of Liberty—“Give me your tired, your poor, your hungry”—that is cherished by many, and the apparent racial bias that closes the doors to many immigrants, is at the heart of the immigration issue. It seems that America has been saying, “we are a nation of immigrants, keep out.”

Misinformation has prejudiced some people who fail to acknowledge that immigrants are good for the economy. They believe that immigrants are competing for American jobs and that acts of terrorism are committed by immigrants. The reality, according to a World Economic Forum Annual Meeting article, is that the majority of those acts are being carried out by native-born citizens. This article goes on to state that immigrant communities have had a positive

impact on areas where they settle, they have been shown to contribute to the economies of their new-found homes and that “countries that fail to integrate immigrants suffer economic and societal consequences” (Goings). In fact, a quarter of all venture capital start-ups in the past twenty years such as eBay, Google and Yahoo were launched by immigrants, and 40% of recent Silicon Valley innovations were created by immigrants; additionally, immigrants or their children have started just under half of all Fortune 500 companies (Goings).

A study conducted in November of 2019 by the Pew Research Center found that the number of immigrants entering the US is at its lowest point in nearly four decades and will decline even more in the current fiscal year. This will have a negative impact on the nation as a whole, as it has been shown that immigrants have a positive effect on the US economy (Daniller). A different study conducted by the same research center in March of 2019, stated that the number of unauthorized immigrants has also been declining since 2007. With more people emigrating than coming in to the US, it is possible this will present an economic issue in the future due to brain drain and other economic ecosystem concerns (Gonzalez-Barrera and O’Connor).

The prejudice caused by misinformation might be one reason immigration numbers are declining. It might also hinder immigrants

from assimilating because they do not feel welcome by the host society and so might be reluctant to embrace it. Arts administrators can facilitate assimilation and combat this bias by being inclusive in their theatrical practices and making an effort to include immigrants in the conversation.

Forced Assimilation Does Not Work

A pattern of US government immigration actions evident throughout American history is one in which immigration and immigrants were not handled well or thoughtfully. In some cases, immigration policy appeared to be motivated by racial bias, even though the US is considered by some to be a nation of immigrants.

The Americanization movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries valued rapid assimilation in order to maximize patriotism and productivity, resulting in a forced type of assimilation. However, Alex Nowrasteh, the Director of Immigration Studies at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, states that, "the Americanization movement had no discernible impacts on immigrant assimilation at best and, at worst, it may have slowed down assimilation" ("Failure"). This initiative only took the form of English language classes and American civics classes but was not clear on

what *Americanization* really meant. It gave Americans a platform to voice their grievances and bias without fear or repercussion. This type of forced assimilation might be categorized as integration.

Nowrasteh's research indicates that this initiative had the opposite result than was intended, "Immigrant writers from many different ethnic groups claimed that Americanization programs disrupted the natural assimilation process and bred resentment against patriotism in immigrant communities" (Nowrasteh, "Failure"). Further, there is no evidence that proves it sped up assimilation. He also claims that immigrants will assimilate because it is in their best interest to do so. "The assimilation of immigrants and their descendants is important to their long-run success and to maximize the benefits from immigration" (Nowrasteh, "Government"). Unfortunately, the government's Americanization movement not only did not speed up assimilation, it was also ineffective.

Vasiliki Fouka, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Stanford University came to similar conclusions by dissecting the anti-German laws in the US that were supposed to speed up assimilation, but instead, halted it among German-Americans. Some state governments had passed anti-German laws that outlawed schooling in German, even in private schools. This slowed down the assimilation process of less-assimilated German-Americans. As evidence, Fouka points to the

increase in school drop-out rates among younger German-Americans, a tendency to choose German names for their children, and marrying other Germans. These immigrants were also less likely to volunteer for the military (Fouka).

Fouka's conclusion was similar to Nowrasteh's, that "Immigrants and their descendants assimilate and become American because it is in their best interests to do so and they cannot help it. Learning English, adopting most of our social norms, and understanding our culture spontaneously happens over time through exposure and because doing so increases their income" (Fouka).

The theory of the Americanization Movement was that the less German language and culture German immigrants were exposed to, the quicker they would assimilate. This theory backfired. Due to the anti-German laws, these immigrants clung to their German culture and language much closer in their home life than they would have otherwise. Jiménez agrees with Nowrasteh and Fouka's findings and calls it reactive ethnicity; when immigrants feel their culture is being taken away, they cling to it harder. If American society wants their immigrants to assimilate, it is in their best interest to be accommodating.

Chapter II

ASPECTS OF ASSIMILATION: HOW DOES THEATRE FITS IN

As assimilation is not part of federal government policy, states, municipalities and nonprofits fill in the gap. This is where theatres and the use of theatre education and participation can be useful for the purposes of effective assimilation, as theatre has a variety of benefits.

What Constitutes Assimilation

Assimilation is multifaceted. Research revealed several key components that impact an immigrant's efforts of assimilation to be: language acquisition, customs, culture, self-confidence, contact with native-born, attendance of social clubs or institutions of host society and dress.

According to several studies, language acquisition is one of the most important factors of immigrant assimilation. It increases job opportunity and facilitates social, civic and political participation (Isphording). It also improves self-confidence and productivity (Murray). Language skills increase an immigrant's social circle, educational success, and family life (Adsera and Pytlikova). Speaking and understanding the language and being able to communicate in a

new country is important to every-day life; from asking someone a question to having a full conversation, language is needed everywhere one goes. Language acquisition also helps an immigrant with other aspects of assimilation. For instance, an immigrant cannot have successful contact with Americans unless they speak English.

English classes and learning about the US culture were the common services provided by over three-hundred nonprofit organizations promoting assimilation. The main objective of these nonprofits was to provide services to improve immigrants' lives and assist in their assimilation into American culture, all while maintaining their cultural roots (Gustavo 5).

Customs are the traditions a country holds. As an immigrant, it might be important to understand the significance and type of customs one's new country holds in order to facilitate everyday life. For instance, an immigrant might not know about St. Patrick's Day, or that it is customary in America to wear a green article of clothing that day. If they do not do that, they might feel like more of an outsider as others point it out.

Culture is the social norms of a society as well as the behaviors and values generally accepted (Merriam-Webster). Culture is an ever-evolving and important part of a country, as it defines and explains things from the words used, to the way people act, to what they wear

and how they style their hair. Usually, when one speaks about assimilation, the implication is that understanding a culture is imperative to an immigrant in order to assimilate.

Another component that might aid in assimilation is self-confidence. Being self-confident helps people navigate new situations with greater ease. Immigrants might find themselves in uncharted territory daily. Being self-confident, trusting their abilities, committing to speaking for themselves and not being afraid of making a mistake might help them assimilate faster. Self-confidence also helps with a successful career, boosts productivity, enables effective communication and increases one's social circle (Camacho).

According to Milton Gordon, American sociologist who devised a theory on the Seven Stages of Assimilation, in addition to the above, entering social clubs or institutions of the host society, surrounding oneself with native-born people and dressing appropriately also aid in assimilation (Gordon). These are important because, like language acquisition, they assist in all the other stages. The more an immigrant surrounds herself with native-born people, the more she will pick up on the language, including colloquialisms, culture and customs. Dress is important because it is one the first things people see, even before they hear the wearer speak.

Aspects of Assimilation Tie In to Theatre

Theatre education and participation can help an immigrant with the above aspects of assimilation. Additionally, researchers found that an activity such as theatre, which involves active social participation is pivotal for pragmatic learning, which is likely to be especially beneficial for students with non-native language backgrounds (Mulker Greenfader et al. 186-7).

Language Acquisition

As previously mentioned, language acquisition is one of the most important aspects of immigrant assimilation. Theatre participation and education can assist in this aspect of assimilation as studies have tied theatre to language acquisition and greater academic achievement and work performance (*Creative Action*). Increased communication skills have been linked to theatre participation (Salmon and Rickaby). This might be because theatre is usually a group effort. One often has a scene partner and an audience, so when someone is participating in theatre, they are required to constantly communicate effectively with others. This assists immigrants because it puts them in a position to use their English, and the more they practice, the better English-speakers they will become.

Teachers may use role playing, or acting, to help increase reading comprehension in the classroom (Santomenna). This might be because by using role-play and being another character, a person, immigrant or native, might put themselves in different situations and learn how to navigate for instance, a job interview. Since rehearsal is required with most theatre activities, one can rehearse different ways of answering questions, or navigating different situations. This will ultimately help an immigrant assimilate as, not only will she be using the language while rehearsing, but she will also be able to see what works and what does not work in different situations.

Theatre classes have been linked to positively influencing, expanding and developing verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Theatre also deepens one's integrated emotional and social intelligence (McCammon et al.). Attending live theatre has been linked to enhanced student learning and higher overall reading, vocabulary and comprehension skills (Pasier). This might be because, in order to participate in theatre, one usually has to read plays and memorize lines. Language acquisition might thus be facilitated as immigrants are constantly memorizing a new language and learning new words and phrases to fully assimilate, in addition to reading plays and learning new words through theatre in that way.

Theatre can assist people in learning the nuances of vocabulary; different words would be used by people to develop situationally specific language skills (Leatherwood); for instance, different vocabulary would be used in an office setting versus language used to describe trauma. With practice, or rehearsal, one can learn the appropriate language for the setting. Many times, immigrants are initially afraid to speak or communicate for fear of making a mistake. Theatre puts them in a situation to practice and rehearse their verbal and nonverbal communication so as to feel more comfortable when similar situations arise.

Language comprehension has been linked to gestures and expression in theatre (Mulker Greenfader et al.). This is especially important for immigrants in their assimilation because it demonstrates that theatre education and participation have a direct connection to learning and advancing one's English language skills. The researchers address simulation theory, which suggests that theatre could help English learners, natives and immigrants, in other, important ways, since theatre does not only use gesture and expression but also make-believe situations where the students can act out their vocabulary in different contexts to better retain information. Researchers realize that acting and reacting to different situations onstage makes students with better language skills model the interactions while students with lower

language skills look up to and learn from them (Mulker Greenfader et al.).

Pairing language with movement, gesture, expression and social interaction with children that are bilingual and monolingual aided in retention and accelerated learning. The researcher's theory, supported by the findings, was that with more engagement there will be improved English comprehension and verbal language skills. Mulker Greenfader's findings also suggest that perception and cognition are linked, which means that there is a link between "language learning to nonverbal physical interaction processes" (Mulker Greenfader et al.186). This, in turn, impacts the working memory, as multisensory events such as theatre education or participation offer multiple avenues of storage and retrieval of information. "For students being taught in a language other than their home language... nonverbal interactions also tap into the students' conceptual knowledge, facilitating comprehension and language development" (Mulker Greenfader et al.).

This research demonstrates that theatre assists immigrants to assimilate more effectively by helping them acquire language skills through not only the use of the English language, but because theatre uses gesture, expression and social interaction along with a strong language component. Theatre was demonstrated to be important in

immigrant assimilation as theatre assists in retaining multiple pieces of information simultaneously, which is important when one wants to learn a lot in a short period of time.

Customs

Customs or traditions are an important part of immigrant assimilation. Theatre participation and education might be able to assist with this by demonstrating cultural norms in plays and on stage. For instance, a play about American holidays can be informative if an immigrant views it or participates in it as an actor. That play might also teach immigrants how to behave according to custom during those holidays, in addition to hearing, speaking, or reading the English language in the play.

Culture

Culture, including social behavior and social norms, is another important part of immigrant assimilation. Studies have linked theatre participation and education to improved classroom behavior which is a form of acceptable social behavior, or social norm (*Creative Action*).

Improvisation was used to practice listening, affirmation, vocal tone modulation and non-verbal communication (Shochet et al.). Vocal

tone, modulation and non-verbal communication vary from country to country. That means, in order for an immigrant to understand and communicate affectively, she needs to understand the vocal intonation of the American language, so she does not misunderstand others and is not misunderstood herself. Understanding the correct use of vocal tone, tempo, and nonverbal communication is important in order to fully culturally assimilate.

Theatre can inform the audience about other cultures and can inform others about the US culture. It can provide cultural accessibility by cutting across literacy skills to reach a wide audience (Leatherwood). By putting other cultures, or the American culture onstage, everyone is culture-sharing and learning from each other. For instance, a play about an average American family can inform an immigrant about how American families may function, and what the norms are within the family unit. Similarly, an immigrant-written play about an average Mexican family can help native audience members better interpret and understand their immigrant neighbors.

How theatre helped young people develop their social skills and peer interactions was examined. Researchers determined that theatre helped increase their confidence, expand their social skills and their peer relationships such as team work and co-operation (Salmon and Rickaby). This study was not done specifically for immigrants, but can

be applied to them due to the aspects of assimilation theatre develops, such as self-confidence, social behavior, and relationships with Americans. This study can be applied to not only the cultural aspect of assimilation, but also to self-esteem, along with interaction with native-born people.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is an important trait for any person. Theatre education and participation is able to assist in developing self-confidence. Increased levels of self-confidence and self-esteem were recorded in a study measuring the effects of theatre classes and how the classes positively impacted adults after graduation and into adulthood (McCammon et al.). A parallel study also concluded that improvisational theatre boosts confidence and self-esteem. (Shochet et al.). This might be because circumstances change constantly in improvisational theatre. One could deduce that the better one becomes at navigating new circumstances, the more confident she is going into a new situation. This can apply to immigrants because they are going to constantly find themselves in new situations that will require them to navigate new social norms. Improvisational theatre and role play can help with this aspect of assimilation.

Increased confidence, self-esteem and a better sense of self were found while examining young people's participation in theatre (Salmon and Rickaby). Similarly, researchers Moran and Alon used theatre to increase self-esteem. The qualitative reports indicated repetitive themes of improved self-esteem, self-knowledge, as well as fun and relaxation, and an increased sense of connection with and empathy for others. This expanded self-esteem carried over to improved social interactions outside of class and interpersonal benefits which included connection with others, a sense of being part of a group and enhanced empathy.

This can be applied to immigrants. Not only does theatre put them in a situation different from their own, it puts them in a position to treat strangers like friends or family, depending on the scene that is being rehearsed or performed. Such interaction not only bonds people in a common experience of making theatre, it could subtly impart behavior insights that could linger after the play or rehearsal is over.

Rehearsal might not only improve one's self-esteem because one is accepted as an equal in the scene, it also creates connections between people quickly. Since the same people might be in a scene together multiple times and rehearse the scene multiple times, a friendship might arise. Immigrants could use theatre education and participation to assimilate more effectively because they probably have

left friends behind and may long for new ones, which leads to the discussion of contact with native-born people.

Contact with Native-Born

Connecting with Americans helps immigrants assimilate. Theatre might help them increase ties with Americans, whether it is for rehearsal, or staying afterwards to run lines; the more exposure an immigrant has to a native, the more they might pick up on terms, social cues, language, pronunciation and pop culture.

Theatre is a good way of having contact with the native-born because it addresses our innate need as humans to relate (McCammon et al.). Theatre improves feelings of social connectedness according to another study. The researchers stated that theatre had a positive impact on the participants' social skills and peer interactions. The participants' involvement in the performing arts such as theatre and music developed their confidence, social skills and supported peer relationships such as team work and co-operation. It also provided them with opportunities for making friends, developing team-working skills, learning how to compromise, and getting along with others. This led to the development of friendships (Salmon and Rickaby).

Young people's involvement in the arts can develop emotional literacy and improve confidence and social skills according to the

qualitative evidence that supports previous claims. Friendships and social connections were crucial impacts of the project. Young people who were previously resistant to new circumstances or found it difficult to make friends and connections, felt a strong sense of engagement and friendship with their fellow cast members (Salmon and Rickaby). This could also be applied to adult immigrants.

Salmon and Rickaby demonstrate that theatre provides the necessary environment for people to make friends quickly. If they befriend Americans and are around them more due to theatre, they might assimilate faster and more effectively because they will be speaking English more and be able to immerse themselves in the culture in addition to the emotional bonding of making something together.

In tying in the social and cultural aspect of assimilation directly to theatre education and participation, Mulker Greenfader states, "learning is initiated and realized through social interaction" (190). The study later states that theatre treats language and expressive communication as social.

Clubs or Institutions of Host Society

Attending social clubs or institutions of the host society is another way for immigrants to assimilate. Theatres can fill this role;

therefore, theatre education and participation can be used by immigrants to assimilate more effectively.

While studying the use of theatre to help troubled youth, researchers found that friendships and social connections were crucial impacts of the project (Salmon and Rickaby). Theatre spaces frequently create a sense of group identity, compassion, and belonging within a world of othering (Leatherwood). Because one sees the same people at rehearsal, it functions similar to a social club since the core group of people, the cast, meet regularly and have a common goal: to put on a play.

A theatre or club helps immigrants with assimilation because, other than being a place that promotes building friendships, it provides structure and normalcy. Rehearsal is typically a certain number of hours, a certain amount of times a week, and a part of the theatre structure. Sharing an experience with Americans puts an immigrant in a place to immerse herself in the culture, the language and the group, possibly helping her assimilate more effectively. Arts administrators might want to consider that creating a structure that provides consistency and normalcy might be an important feature to use in their programs.

Dress

Dress is an important part of immigrant assimilation. Dress is part of our outward appearance to the world. Psychologically, the clothes you wear influence how people hear what you say (Tervooren). In theatre, costumes are used to inform the audience about a character and can also be used to educate the audience on how people dress in different parts of the world. For instance, a teenage girl in Kabul might dress differently from a teenage girl in L.A.

Through theatre, one could understand and learn about the differences and similarities of cultures, especially when it comes to attire. An immigrant can also understand what an article of clothing represents culturally. For instance, a scarf is used differently in different parts of the world. Theatre can educate an immigrant on what they are visually communicating to people depending on how they wear a scarf, whether it is on their head, their head and shoulders, just their shoulders, whether it is used as a shirt, a skirt, or a dress.

Chapter III

THEATRE EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION USED TO ASSIST IMMIGRANTS WITH ASSIMILATION

Why the Use of Theatre

Theatre education and participation not only assists in the different aspects of assimilation mentioned above, it can be beneficial to immigrants in other ways.

Live theatre can be used as a teaching tool to enhance student learning and retention of information, in addition to levels of empathy, one study reveals. Research findings demonstrate that “81% of the students surveyed thought the live performance helped them retain information more effectively than any other form, such as film or textbook. Of all the students surveyed, 88% thought they felt an emotional connection with the actors that helped them focus and learn more” (Pasier). This is especially important for immigrants and their pace of assimilation because they undertake several different aspects of assimilation simultaneously. This study supports the conclusion that theatre is an effective way to learn and retain multiple types of

information at once, which is beneficial when one has much to learn in a short period of time. The researchers concluded that theatre improves critical-thinking skills and offers people an opportunity to analyze an event from multiple perspectives, which also contributes to rising levels of empathy (Pasier). This might be important for immigrants in assimilation, as they can understand and see their assimilation process from different perspectives, which might ultimately assist them assimilate more effectively.

The power of theatre is addressed in several studies. One states it is because it empowers participants to think and function improvisationally in an active and ever-changing environment. Theatre deepens one's integrated emotional and social intelligences, and expands one's verbal and nonverbal communication skills (McCammon et al.). This can be applied to immigrants and their journey to assimilation through theatre because it demonstrates that theatre is a practical means for an immigrant to work on language, social skills and other aspects of assimilation previously discussed. Simultaneously, theatre offers practice on how to cope with new situations, which might be something an immigrant would find themselves in most of the time in a different country.

Theatre engages the audience in ways other forms of communication cannot. The power of emotional engagement means

that there is full sensory engagement. Sensory engagement can help audience members who potentially struggle with emotional focus. It can foster teamwork, collaboration, and problem-solving, as well as resolve anxiety and depression (Pasier). This can be applied to immigrants and their use of theatre for assimilation because, since theatre engages all the senses, immigrants who are not yet fluent in English can understand or communicate the plot of the scene by using or understanding few words. This works especially well with improvisational theatre, as there is no script.

Additionally, being in another country and receiving considerable new information at once can be overwhelming and cause anxiety. Theatre can help alleviate that anxiety. Improvisational theatre can assist immigrants with low English language skills due to its nature, but can also be a useful tool for more fluent immigrant English speakers as a form of social interaction, communication, language building, cultural exploration and peer connection, all aspects of assimilation discussed previously.

The power of theatre to nurture critical consciousness among immigrant youth was demonstrated through a culturally responsive program (Ngo). Researchers chose to study theatre because it nurtures critical consciousness by providing an opportunity for Hmong immigrant youth to “name the world” and represent their lives. The

study demonstrates that critical pedagogy provides an education that empowers individuals through critical reflection and critical action. Ngo concludes that individuals are empowered when they understand their circumstances are not only shaped by their actions, but also by broader social, political, and historical forces. The adolescents were able to “name their world,” develop an understanding of injustices, and gain a sense of action (Ngo 41). Ngo also claims that the arts open up multiple possibilities for reflection and expression that allow people to understand their own lives in relation to their surroundings and environment (7).

In this after-school theatre study, students, caregivers and researchers alike, came to understand that theatre programs offered a way for the youth to rehearse and re-script their own life stories (Ngo 62). The theatre program helped many of the Hmong youth engage and navigate issues they deal with in their everyday lives. Another positive outcome from their involvement in the theatre program was that they were able to imagine new possibilities for themselves in American culture. The participants experienced acceptance of self and increased self-confidence due to the theatre program, which is an aspect of assimilation. One participant states that participating in the program helped her realize that “being a Hmong is not a bad thing” (Ngo 56). This self-acceptance is significant in the growth of the

individual and the benefits of that acceptance trickle down to the community and society at large.

Theatre Is Being Used to Help with Assimilation Today

Immigrants do not always have to do this work of assimilation on their own for there are theatres around the country helping immigrants with assimilation today through theatre education and participation.

Imagination Stage in Bethesda, Maryland, started a project called *iÓyeme!* (translation: listen to me!). *iÓyeme!* is a collaborative project that has been cultivated specifically for the increasing number of refugee children fleeing violence in Central America. The objective of *iÓyeme!* is to provide a creative arts outlet for young people, using best practices, culturally-based, trauma-informed theatre and arts activities to create a sense of community among the participants and provide a safe space for immigrant youth to share their stories.

Imagination Stage's hope is that as a result of their efforts, children will not only feel welcome in their new home country but can, through theatre, begin the process that will allow them to assimilate into their new community and culture. Imagination Stage's staff uses language acquisition, self-confidence and contact with Americans as their primary assimilation tools by communicating with the immigrant

youth in English, empowering them to use their own voice, and having American staff around, including immigrant staff.

The Imagination Stage website asserts that, "There is no better way to connect to another human being than through the arts." Students in their programs use theatre and the arts to share their own stories through poetry, performances and writing. Based on the experiences of the young people in the *Óyeme* workshops, Imagination Stage commissioned the play *Óyeme, the Beautiful* to build empathy and understanding in the local community. The more the community understands the immigrant struggle, the easier it will hopefully be for immigrants to assimilate because of the native's understanding, acceptance and inclusion.

In an interview with Jeff Sachs, Education Associate at Imagination Stage, he states that theatre is an effective tool that requires people to come together. As elements of coming together, he notes the interaction within a cast as well as the emotional connection between cast and audience. Due to the type of community that is created and the shared experience, theatre engenders learning, therapy, and empathy, all important qualities in building emotional ties. The representation the children feel when they see themselves onstage, the celebration with which they and their cultures are portrayed and the dialogue that commences during and after the

performance is a combination of things that is very easily shared through theatre. The process promotes moving forward and making America their home by enabling assimilation (Sachs).

Bond Street Theatre, a New York City-based company, uses theatre to educate, inspire, and provide a way for people to emotionally move forward in areas of conflict. According to an interview with their Artistic Director, Joanna Sherman, theatre is recognized as an effective means to disseminate practical information about issues such as health and civic rights. Theatre-based training improves learning abilities, develops leadership and communication skills, boosts self-confidence, fosters teamwork, stimulates creative thinking and problem solving, and encourages self-expression. Theatre gives voice to the voiceless and provides a safe environment and the creative tools to address critical problems that can directly improve the community. In particular, Bond Street Theatre has found that improvisational theatre games and scenes written by immigrants assist in the process of assimilation and moving forward emotionally (Sherman).

Cornerstone Theatre Company in Los Angeles was founded to bridge cultural gaps within the community. The theatre company created Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras, a theatre group made up of day laborers. This group develops and performs plays about anti-

immigrant issues. They use theatre as a vehicle to create change and educate immigrant workers about their rights (*Cornerstone Theatre*). The group empowers its community by creating stories that reflect immigrant experiences, which not only helps immigrants see themselves onstage and learn about how to address daily difficulties, but also educates the rest of the community on what the immigrant population is going through. This assists participants in assimilating because they are also learning about issues and their rights in America and what the cultural and social expectations are of them in the US.

Theatre Has Been Used for Assimilation in the Past

Using theatre to help immigrants with assimilation is not a new concept. It dates back to the Settlement House movement, part of the Social Reform movement, of the late nineteenth century.

Jane Addams was instrumental in this movement. She was an activist, social worker, sociologist, author, first woman to ever receive an honorary degree from Yale University and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She co-founded Chicago's Hull-House, one of America's most famous settlement houses (Cavna). The Hull-House "became not only a cultural center with music, art, and theatre offerings, but also a safe haven and a place where immigrants... could find companionship and support and the assistance they needed for

coping with the modern city,” according to the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum.

In an interview with the founding Chair of the Boston College Theatre Department, Hull-House and Jane Addams expert, Stuart Hecht says that the Hull-House was a bridge between the poor, immigrant community and the middle to upper-middle class. It created a common ground to foster community. Jane Addams saw it as a place to exchange ideas and knowledge among the classes for the purpose of bridging the social gap. In his dissertation, *“Social and Artistic Integration: The Emergence of Hull-House Theatre,”* he speaks about how the performers at Hull-House demonstrated the potential the working class and immigrant population possessed to the upper-class through their theatrical productions.

Hecht also states that Addams used the theatre as a way to provide models of moral behavior and social conduct that were not available to the poor. She believed that a piece of theatre that was consistent with the lives and experiences of immigrants could serve as a standard for social conduct and moral behavior and that the theatre was a place where “the validity of accepted social truths’ could be tested by their believability on the stage” (Hecht). Later on, the Hull-House would encourage theatre productions to address social concerns. Since commercial theatres considered that to be too risky,

the Hull-House Theatre became the hub for serious, dramatic pieces of theatre addressing social matters. Addams helped immigrants find a voice, a sense of identity, and to establish control over their lives. Theatre was a personalized form of social rehabilitation, or assimilation, used to provide them with autonomy.

Alice Minnie Herts and Lillian Wald had the same idea about using theatre to assist immigrants in assimilation in the early twentieth century. "Assimilating Immigrants Through Drama: The Social Politics of Alice Minnie Herts and Lillian Wald," presents two different ways of assisting immigrants in assimilation through theatre. Identifying the pros and cons of each, the author concludes, "As multicultural theorists state, language acquisition and socialization are inseparable" (Tuite 14) and theatre education and participation are sound ways to achieve both simultaneously.

Viola Spolin was drama supervisor for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930's and worked with children and recent immigrants to the US, some of whom spoke little English. Using improvisational theatre, theatre games and play, she taught lessons in language, cooperation, socialization and other important skills. Since one does not need to know how to read, or have extensive language skills to do improvisational theatre, it is a powerful tool to teach

immigrants the language and cultural social cues of a country in order to assimilate more effectively (“Improv Theater”).

Extending the idea of improvisational theatre beyond the cast to audiences as well, in the 1970s, “Theatre of the Oppressed” was created by Augusto Boal specifically as a form of community-based education using theatre as a tool for social change (*Mandala Center for Change*). Boal “worked on creating a less passive form of theatre, one in which the audience would not just identify with characters but would actively invest in the outcome. He wanted to create something educational, something which taught people to actively deal with oppression in their real lives and start a conversation” (Muscato).

Theatre of the Oppressed is part performance and part activism. Within the performance, audience members are actively engaging with each other to tackle issues of oppression, sexism, racism and other challenges (Muscato). It was used for and with communities facing discrimination to inspire transformative action through theatre (*Theatre of the Oppressed NYC*). This form of theatre has been used by marginalized communities, including immigrants, to move forward from a trauma.

Where Sachs from Imagination Stage talked about a connection between performer and audience in general terms, Theatre of the Oppressed blurs the lines between performer and audience. By actively

stepping into the role of performer and engaging the cast, an audience member creates a character of their own, leading to greater internalization of the subject matter. This assists in assimilation especially when the subject matter onstage addresses American culture or customs, so the audience can learn and internalize those aspects of assimilation in addition to language.

What Other American Groups Are Doing to Help with Assimilation: How Can Theater Help

Some churches have also taken a stand on immigration by assisting immigrants and immigrant assimilation. For instance, the United Church of Christ is very active in assisting immigrants in different areas. Its services range from welcoming toolkits to language classes and legal services.

Similarly, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) located in Baltimore, Maryland, advocates, supports and empowers immigrants who require assistance since 1939. From refugee resettlement to career services, LIRS has been able to assist thousands of immigrants with the difficult day-to-day of living in a new country (*LIRS*).

Another nonprofit sector that assists immigrants in assimilation is libraries. The Denver Public Libraries for instance offer “free

citizenship, English, and art classes—as well as child care, homework help, and job search and legal resources” to help immigrants get their papers in order and assimilate (Oldham). They partner with other nonprofits to offer services and answer questions from housing to resume-writing. They have noticed and noted that assimilation has a positive effect on immigrants’ income if or when they start assimilating (Oldham).

The Arlington Education and Employment Program utilized plays and theatre games to help immigrants learn English and American customs, move forward emotionally, and find a place in American society (“Capturing the Immigrant”).

These nonprofits might be important for theatres as they are additional organizations to partner with that are already working on immigrant assimilation. Another way theatres can find a broader audience through other nonprofits is by supporting the other nonprofits’ activities and offering acting or improvisational workshops or interview role playing games for further English learning through theatre education and participation. Theatre administrators should consider cross-promotion with these other nonprofits. The more opportunities that exist and the more visible these opportunities are, the more immigrants will be aware of the wealth of inexpensive resources that exist to aid their assimilation into American culture.

Conclusion

Research revealed several key components that impact an immigrant's efforts at assimilation. The key aspects that emerged are: language acquisition, customs, culture, self-confidence, contact with natives, attendance of social clubs, and dress. Theatre education and participation assists immigrants who choose to assimilate into their new culture do so more effectively, and this paper has demonstrated how it addresses each of these components. The full sensory engagement required of theatre assists the immigrant in noticing and interpreting multiple environmental cues that denote cultural norms while improvisational theatre techniques assist the immigrant by giving them the tools to deal gracefully with culturally unexpected situations.

Theatre is a unique tool to be used by arts administrators in order to help immigrants because one does not have to change much about it to apply it as an assimilation tool. The arts administrator does not have to look for a new curriculum, other types of theatre games or different theatre work dealing specifically with and for immigrants.

An arts administrator of a theatre whose mission is broadly inclusive, or with a personal desire to assist immigrants with assimilation, may wonder how to take steps towards this goal. There are two broad strategies, one targeted to immigrants only, the other directed at a blend of immigrants and native-born Americans.

Immigrant-only classes would be especially beneficial to newcomers who are uncertain how to navigate their new culture and could become aware of theatre as an option that could assist them in assimilating. These classes would be more beneficial if they were improvisation-based, as these immigrants might not have extensive language skills. The instructor would emphasize vocabulary and non-verbal communication and encourage discussion of the cultural significance of situations or dialogue in a scene or exercise. These classes would be most successful if they included the native-born in some capacity, for instance, having American teaching assistants.

This approach requires appropriate marketing. Flyers could be distributed at libraries, churches, or legal aid offices where immigrants congregate and sample workshops could be offered in those venues. The arts administrator might ask immigrants who have already participated in the classes to personally invite newcomers to attend the workshops or enroll in classes. Having a teacher who is an

immigrant herself lead the classes at these churches or libraries would also be appropriate and put immigrants more at ease.

The second strategy is engaging more immigrants in classes with native-born Americans. This would encourage empathy and culture sharing. These classes might include more scene work and reading. It would be beneficial to have a reflective component after every exercise, scene or class where feelings, emotions and understanding are discussed. This discussion could be fruitful by allowing the students to open up about themselves, things they did not understand about a scene, a word choice, or an action that was culture-based. In such a class, immigrants might enact a scene about how they would go about an everyday task in their country, then the native-born Americans could do the same; afterwards, both groups could recognize and discuss the differences.

Theatre has been demonstrated to be an effective art form to use for immigrant assimilation; however, not everyone might enjoy or want to try theatre. It is possible that, since theatre has been demonstrated to be good at assisting in assimilation, other art forms could also accomplish the same result. For instance, music could assist with most of the components of assimilation established above like language acquisition, culture, self-confidence, contact with natives and attendance of social clubs. Further research could investigate how

other art forms compare to theatre, or complement theatre, in assisting immigrants with effective assimilation. Other forms of art could be incorporated with theatre in creating a unique tool for immigrant assimilation, thus creating a new artform that could be specifically used for the purposes of effective assimilation.

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