

HIP HOP THEATRE: A Call for Change  
For *Curtains Up!: Conflict Transformation Using Theatre*  
War Child Holland training manual  
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She has found the answers in the continuity of change  
She is finding the meaning  
She has decided that,  
“I’ve got the mic in my hands...  
I am the mic.”

The above words were spoken by four young women at the end of a devised Hip Hop Theatre workshop in 2006 at the Sibikwa Community Theatre in East Rand, South Africa. During this three-day workshop, all the participants had the opportunity to lead warm-up exercises, share their individual skills, learn some Hip Hop dance and beatboxing (making drum sounds with the mouth and voice), do self-scripting exercises, experiment with a sound and movement composition, and engage in dialogue about Hip Hop, misogyny, violence, materialism, South Africa, and the state of world economics and the planet. Only one of the women in this particular piece, a B-girl (dancer), considered herself to be a Hip Hop “head” or member of the global activist youth culture of Hip Hop that is frequently obscured by the multinational recording industry that gives it a bad name. Nevertheless, at the end of the process, participant Leboxa Kolani explained, “I didn’t realize that Hip Hop was part of my everyday life...It’s something that’s there... It’s something you live everyday...Because Hip Hop is about expressing yourself, how you feel.”<sup>1</sup> Grabbing the mic, for someone who identifies with Hip Hop,

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<sup>1</sup> Rathlhagane, Lucky. Sibikwa Hip Hop Theatre Workshop. Rec June 8, 2006. Unpublished video footage, East Rand, South Africa, 2006.

means taking matters into her own hands and being an agent for change. It means recognizing her own power.

In most parts of the world right now, Hip Hop is always already present – whether a person is aware of it or not. Three generations have now been born under the sign of Hip Hop and the music is pervasive throughout the world in both urban and rural settings. Young people are now accustomed to high velocity media that is fragmented and non-linear, reflecting Hip Hop’s aesthetic and the “ways of knowing” of these current younger generations. Moreover, these generations crave truth – they have heard rappers and poets express themselves frankly and passionately about poverty and the violence in their communities that claims the lives of young people. There is no turning back. Educators, youth workers, social workers, and even parents who do not match this level of straight-talk – or “keeping it real” – risk losing the listening of this young demographic. These adult figures will also miss critical opportunities to hear the voices of tomorrow’s leaders in their own carefully crafted vernacular and heed their call for change.

Young people worldwide know that the system is broken. Hip Hop provides, as Hip Hop generation novelist Adam Mansbach writes, a “structural metaphor for democracy.”<sup>2</sup> The ethos of Hip Hop culture is embedded in its creative practices and reveals an inherent process of democracy building – from “ciphering,” improvising and battling using poetry, music, and dance in a circle, to political engagement such as “Rap the Vote.” When Hip Hop is combined with theatre – especially in an ensemble or devised theatre approach – the result is a powerful form of self-expression that, by its nature, embodies leadership training. This process reveals young people taking a stand on issues that matter to them, expressing themselves to each other – and to adults – and

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<sup>2</sup> In Chang, Jeff, ed. Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip Hop. New York: Basic Civitas, 2006.

working together to create moments of structural change inside the carefully constructed container of a dramatic exercise. This training offers a rehearsal for life outside the cipher or workshop. In August 2009, Hip Hop Theatre Initiative led a workshop with Roma youth and allies in Hungary. We asked the group what they wanted to say to the world – and then took all adults out of the room so the participants had autonomy over their space and ideas (one of our favorite practices!). The group very quickly generated:

Wake, wake, wake up the world,  
Peace, peace, peace for the world,  
Wake, wake, wake up the world,  
And save the world.

These are the thoughts and prayers of young people around the world today. Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theatre provide an opportunity for young people to be heard, to problem-solve as a team, and to articulate their collective vision for the future.

Daniel Banks, Ph.D., is Founder and Director of the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative, a program that uses Hip Hop Theatre for youth empowerment and leadership training and has worked on campuses and in communities across the U.S. and in Ghana, South Africa, Hungary, and Mexico. He is author of "Youth Leading Youth: Hip Hop and Hiplife Theatre in Ghana and South Africa" in *Acting Together on the World Stage: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*, a project of Coexistence International, Brandeis University, and Theatre Without Borders, for which he is on the Steering Committee, and editor of the critical anthology *Say Word! Voices from Hip Hop Theater* (University of Michigan Press). He is Co-Director of DNAWORKS, an arts and service organization dedicated to using the arts as a catalyst for dialogue and healing.