



*Using the language of jazz to tell stories relevant to children's lives*

# **The Jazz Drama Program**

## **White Paper<sup>1</sup>**

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- 1. What is The Jazz Drama Program?..... 3
- 2. What is “the Language of Jazz”?..... 3
- 3. The history of The Jazz Drama Program.....4
- 4. How does The Jazz Drama Program Work?.....5
- 5. How is The Jazz Drama Program Innovative?.....7
- 6. What is the Impact of The Jazz Drama Program?.....8
- 7. Why is The Jazz Drama Program Important?..... 9
- 8. Why Produce a Jazz Drama Program Musical?.....10
- 9. What is The Jazz Drama Program Vision for the Future?.....10
- 10. Further Reading.....11

## **What is The Jazz Drama Program?**

The Jazz Drama Program (JDP) is an arts education program that combines jazz music and theater to create a lasting formative experience for young people.

The Jazz Drama Program creates new jazz theater works that tell stories children can relate to; develops new pedagogical practices in the field of jazz education and drama; produces and disseminates recordings, scripts and scores to support productions and workshops; provides a setting whereby professional musicians, choreographers and set, costume, sound, and lighting designers mentor children. The program also serves to illuminate the value of jazz and jazz musicians as a continuous source of inspiration.

The Jazz Drama Program celebrates American culture at its best: creativity, community, and collaboration.

## **What is “the Language of Jazz”?**

Jazz is a way of looking at the world, an aesthetic that has inspired countless artists in music, literature, dance, theater and beyond. The language of jazz uses improvisation, risk, humor, and imagination. Though much of popular music today traces its roots to jazz and blues, young people have yet to embrace it as their own. This is mostly due to a lack of meaningful exposure to the art form.

Jazz is a language that is dynamic and engaging, offering a challenging platform for individual and collective creativity. It provides a forum for new directions in theater for young people and an educational framework rooted firmly in the democratic values of America.

## **The History of The Jazz Drama Program**

Though officially incorporated in December 2003, The Jazz Drama Program began as an idea through a Meet the Composer-New Music for Schools Grant awarded to jazz composer Eli Yamin in 1998 and monies from The Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation. That year saw the premiere of the first jazz musical composed by Yamin and sixth grade teacher Clifford Carlson. The resulting effort, When Malindy Swings, based on African American folklore, and involving students in the drama and music programs at the Louis Armstrong Middle School in Queens, New York, was a smash success. National Public Radio's JazzSet with Branford Marsalis aired a 10-minute feature on the project nationwide. This prompted Yamin and Carlson to write four more jazz musicals over the next four years, thereby launching a groundbreaking idea in jazz education. The combination of the power of experiential learning with story telling and total immersion in the language of jazz as a potent tool for communication has enabled students to experience jazz across the curriculum in a way they never had before.

The Jazz Drama Program is based in New York and received its 501(c)(3) tax exempt status in September 2004. Since the formation of the non-profit company, The Jazz Drama Program has partnered with numerous schools in New York City to support productions of jazz musicals by Yamin and Carlson. In 2008, the JDP embarked on its first international endeavor by co-producing a tour of Eli Yamin's jazz band with the U.S. Department of State. The tour covered 7 cities in India, was called "Jazz Stories from India and America," and matched Yamin's jazz quartet in collaboration with top Indian musicians in three distinct Indian musical traditions. During this tour, important relationships were formed with musicians and arts producers in Chennai, Mumbai and Goa.

In 2009, the JDP began its collaboration with the Mississippi Arts Commission. At the Whole Schools Summer Institute in Oxford, MS, the JDP conducted a 9-hour workshop

for teachers on The Jazz Drama Program and produced a workshop version of Nora's Ark, a jazz musical by Eli Yamin and Clifford Carlson, with 25 Mississippi teachers. This led to the Mississippi premiere of Nora's Ark at the Nora Davis Magnet School in Laurel, MS on April 27, 2010--Duke Ellington's 111<sup>th</sup> birthday. The JDP again presented a 9-hour teachers' workshop in the summer of 2010 at the Whole Schools Retreat in Meridian, MS, culminating with a workshop performance of Nora's Ark on stage at the historic Riley Center.

In 2010, Eli Yamin led a series of Jazz Drama Program workshops at the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival in Moscow, Idaho and a second workshop at Jazz House Kids Teacher Training in New Jersey. The Santa Fe School of Arts and Sciences produced Nora's Ark in January 2010, involving over 50 children in the production and performing for several hundred people.

The year 2010 also marked the beginning of a partnership between The Jazz Drama Program and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus Academy, New York City's top youth training choir. This partnership led to the CD recording of Nora's Ark at Avatar Studios, one of New York City's top recording studios.

## **How Does The Jazz Drama Program Work?**

The Jazz Drama Program commissions new jazz musicals and supports their production nationwide through licensing scripts and scores. The program produces high quality recordings of the musicals to support these productions. The Jazz Drama Program also provides professional development for teachers to support productions in all areas including music, dance, drama and arts integration.

Teaching artists and classroom teachers work together using a collaborative, dynamic and multimodality approach to teaching for the production of JDP musicals. Written into

the stories are themes of freedom, cooperation, equality, social commitment and global awareness, which promote independent ideas through collaborative support groups.

The Jazz Drama Program provides a groundbreaking learning platform that reveals the importance of jazz in American life on a completely new level. While the JDP believes that telling the stories of great jazz musicians is important, JDP artists have learned that there is a much better way to reach young people with the subject of jazz. The relevance of the story being told provides intrinsic motivation to students and facilitates an exceptionally accelerated learning environment.

“Ownership of the work is a driving force in arts training. The student has chosen this path and knows he will stand or fall based on his own effort. He challenges himself to succeed at a task he has set. He takes his work seriously and knows that true motivation comes from within. He understands that he must sustain himself when the going gets rough. He understands that hard work and discipline are required if he is to succeed. If it takes six hours of practice a day, that is what he does. He is the keeper of his own vision.” (Stephanie B. Perrin, Center for the Arts in the Base Curriculum,, 1997)

The program’s experiential method enables students to own the essential ingredients of jazz in the context of the stories they are telling. JDP’s teaching artists help students make the swing and shuffle beats their own in a spirit of fun and collaboration. The notion of improvisation becomes an unstoppable learning tool that can be used in music, dance, theater and everyday life. Historical dances, such as the Swing and Cakewalk, become visceral learning experiences with clear connections to American history. Practicing diction in the context of singing a bebop line, with many syllables and a driving rhythmic framework, students are challenged both physically and mentally to expand their view of their own abilities cognitively, creatively, and in terms of self-confidence.

The Jazz Drama Program's master teachers draw on a wealth of experience with students of all ages and with top New York City cultural institutions including Jazz at Lincoln Center, Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education, the Diane McIntyre Dance Company, National Actors Theatre, Alvin Ailey Dance Company, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. Our teaching artists reflect the significant ethnic and racial diversity of our world.

## **How is The Jazz Drama Program Innovative?**

The largest non-profit organization dedicated to jazz in the world is Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC). While JALC's programs include presenting concerts, workshops, and jazz curriculum to diverse populations, none of its programs combine jazz and theater.

The combination of jazz and theater opens up a whole new world of possibilities. Created by a jazz musician and a schoolteacher, the subjects of JDP musicals include growing up as a contemporary teen (Hear My Voice); the healing power of the blues (Message From Saturn); a modern retelling of Noah's Ark with themes of freedom, cooperation, and survival (Nora's Ark); a dramatic retelling of the struggle for women's suffrage (Holding The Torch For Liberty); and an interpretation of a traditional African American coming-of-age folk tale (When Malindy Swings). The JDP has created a new framework for jazz education that gets whole communities involved in the jazz aesthetic. With its joyous rhythms, room for individual expression, raw emotional power and capacity to heal, children discover how jazz can be an invaluable resource for life.

The Jazz Drama Program draws on the styles of one or more jazz greats in every show. The artistic vision of these cultural pioneers is brought into play as new stories are developed, thereby giving children new skills and language to explore the world they live in. Students learn to listen by way of Duke Ellington; express individuality through Louis Armstrong and Sun Ra; celebrate their playful yet prolific sides as Thelonious Monk

celebrated his; and discover a voice as the way Mary Lou Williams, John Coltrane, James P. Johnson, Eubie Blake, W.C. Handy, Ethel Waters and Count Basie discovered theirs.

## **What is the Impact of The Jazz Drama Program?**

Real and lasting social change comes from learning environments that are truly challenging, stimulate imagination and curiosity, and engage our full capacity for artistic expression, teamwork and discipline. “For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving...” (Dr. Maxine Greene, Variations on A Blue Guitar)

The Jazz Drama Program offers an initiation into jazz as a compelling language and aesthetic to express both historic and deeply personal truths. Seventh grader Tatiana Walker performed in Holding The Torch For Liberty, which tells the story of the fight for Women’s Suffrage circa 1920. Tatiana writes:

“I learned that in 1920 women had it tough. If it wasn’t for their boldness, power, optimism and courage, women wouldn’t have the rights they have now. This experience has changed me by allowing me to visualize through dance and music, [sic] it helps you find your inner voice and soul, it keeps you motivated on the weekends and it teaches you to be focused and to concentrate.”

The Jazz Drama Program has supported the production of 18 JDP musicals around the country by licensing and supplying jazz musical scripts scores and CDs, providing consulting services, and contracting teaching artists and professional musicians to mentor students. Over 2000 students have participated directly in productions as actors, singers, dancers, technical crew and pit orchestra musicians, while over 21,000 students and parents have attended JDP musicals. Students create important lifelong relationships after working together on these musicals and stay in contact through The Jazz Drama

Program's website and online social networks. The Jazz Drama Program has an outstanding record for fostering bonds between young people and teachers. The JDP High School Internship Program has involved over 50 alumni as mentors to younger children. In addition, alumni receive further mentorship from master teaching artists and teachers.

## **Why is The Jazz Drama Program Important?**

Jazz is a way of looking at the world, an aesthetic that has yet to take hold in the hearts and minds of American youth.

“Deemed a national treasure by the U.S. Congress, jazz is a unique American art form, and its musicians are recognized the world over as America's cultural ambassadors. Despite high-profile activities, jazz music does not fare as well as other music forms, making it challenging to maintain and continue this treasure.” (National Endowment for the Arts Research Report No. 43)

Although the field of jazz education has grown steadily in the past 50 years, its primary focus has been on instrumental instruction and the creation of jazz bands in schools. While these programs are important, they have failed to bring widespread acceptance of jazz as an art form at the heart of our culture. Many schools don't have band programs and many students are not touched by current jazz education efforts.

The Jazz Drama Program meets a need that has been sorely lacking in the field of jazz education. To date, various programs exist that teach jazz from an instrumental instruction perspective, but practically none exist for children who do not play an instrument. The JDP offers a unique, rare opportunity. By developing stories which use the language of jazz—not just in the music but in the whole aesthetic—the JDP has been

able to give a wide range of children, who otherwise have no exposure to jazz, a deep and fulfilling jazz experience. Through acting, singing, dancing and participating in the crew, the stories become internalized, students take ownership of them, and the potential for a lifelong love of jazz, in all its forms, is implanted.

## **Why Produce a Jazz Drama Program Musical?**

“High quality arts education programs promote creative, intuitive, intelligent young people, Students who study the arts seriously are taught to see better, to envision, to persist, to be playful and learn from mistakes, to make critical judgments and justify such judgments.” (Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education, Teachers College Press 2007)

Increasingly, local school boards and independent educators are recognizing the importance of an arts-centered approach to learning. The Jazz Drama Program encompasses all of the critical learning modalities, reaches large numbers of participants, and brings back to education the creative atmosphere for learning that has been lacking in many schools throughout America.

## **What is The Jazz Drama Program’s Vision for the Future?**

The Jazz Drama Program envisions:

- A world where jazz is embraced as America’s central art form, both in the U.S. and around the globe.
- A world where jazz musicals are routinely produced in schools throughout the U.S. and abroad.

## JDP White Paper

- A world where young people are able to forge a lifelong relationship with jazz as a source of fun, excitement, strength and joy.

## Further Reading

- Christine Goodheart, [A Case for the Arts in Education 2000](#)
- Robin Pogrebin, [Book Tackles Old Debate: Role of Art in Schools 2007](#)
- Stephanie B. Perrin, [Education Through the Arts in Secondary Schools 1997](#)
- Dee Dickinson, [Learning Through the Arts 2009](#)
- Eric Oddleifson, Chairman, CABC, [The Necessary Role of the Arts in Education and Society: Finding the Creative Power Within Us to Control Our Lives and Shape Our Destinies 1996](#)
- James E. Zull, [Arts, Neuroscience, and Learning 2002](#)
- Charles Fowler, D.M.A., [Every Child Needs the Arts 2009](#)
- [Champions For Change: The Impact of The Arts On Learning 1999](#)

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## Endnotes

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