

Drama for kids only. A play to combat school violence.

OVERVIEW

Playwright William Mastrosimone's three children came home from school to report that some student in their Enumclaw, Washington school had written a scary message on the board:

I'm going to kill everyone in this class. And the teacher too.

The years 1997 and 1998 had already produced school killings in Springfield, OR, Jonesboro, AR, and West Paducah, KY. The playwright (responsible for the popular "Extremities") couldn't sleep that night, and in pacing the floor came up with an idea to produce a play that high school students could put on.

He took the play to the theater arts director at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, where a 15-year-old gunman had killed two students in May of 1998. The theater director, Michael Fisher, questioned the project at first:

I was guarded at first. The media loves to put everyone's pain on display, and we weren't going to be parading children around for the media. (But because he respected Mastrosimone's work, he showed it to some of his students.) They all wanted to talk about it; it touched a nerve.

Mastrosimone's initial plan was to send a copy of the play to every high school in the country. But he realized it should belong to kids themselves and so put the script on the Internet. Although he has received good offers from professional companies and the film industry, this play can never be presented by professionals; it is a gift for teenagers everywhere...a play about and against violence.

So, in April of 1999 there were two web sites. The first was created by Eric D. Harris of Littleton, Colorado (AOL took it down hours after the terrible shooting). It read: "I kill who I don't like," along with other depictions of hate and violence.

At the same time there was a contrasting message on William Mastrosimone's web page (www.bangbangyouredead.com):

We are all waiting for the shot to ring out. We're all dreading that phone call that will follow the gunshot. We are all bonded by our anxiety that tomorrow morning a potential killer will rise up to act out his fantasy using us as figures in a video game.

The play is to be performed by students on a bare stage. The play. "Bang Bang You're Dead," opens with the killer's first night in jail. Specters of those he has killed and wounded come to him asking, "Why me?" Their voices are persistent and unrelenting:

Just five bullets wounded hundreds...Thousands...Wounds that bleed. Wounds that weep. Wounds that will never heal.

Maestrosimone has written this play especially for vulnerable and angry kids who can become killers:

I want them to see their peers so that the potential killer will see the kid who sits next to him up on that stage.

Later in the play, the potential gunman is saying:

I didn't know it would be forever. I thought it was 'bang bang you're dead' again. I thought I could hit the reset button and start over. Why can't I have another chance.

In getting this drama out over the Internet, the playwright also wants to use a technology which communicates hate and media violence for good:

Technology doesn't make us better. It magnifies what's good in us, and it magnifies what's bad in us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you like this idea? Could you use it? How?
2. Do you find it ironic that this webpage was on the Internet before the mayhem in Littleton, Colorado—and without most students or teachers knowing about it? Do you think its use could have made a difference in Littleton? How so, or why not?
3. Why are the practical benefits of drama so overlooked in schools and youth work?

IMPLICATIONS

1. This dramatist's response to violence is an example of ancient wisdom (found in the biblical Romans 12:21): "Don't let yourself be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
2. Avoiding cynicism or vitriolic and overly-simplistic blame, we must find creative ways to open communication among the most alienated members of the youth culture.

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