



GABLESTAGE



NO CHILD...

By Nilaja Sun

Study Guide

2009

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Gideon Lester talks to Nilaja Sun about No Child...

The article below appears courtesy of American Repertory Theatre, where Nilaja Sun performed **No Child...** prior to coming to GableStage.

Gideon Lester: How did you come to write **No Child...** ?

Nilaja Sun: I was commissioned by the New York State Council of the Arts and Epic Theatre Ensemble to write a show about education. I'd been a teaching artist in the New York public school system for nine years, so it was a subject I knew well. I'd written and performed four solo shows in the past, but at first I thought **No Child...** would be a play for two or three actors. It was only after I'd written it that I realized I might be able to pull it off as a one-person show. There are many more characters in it than I've ever performed before, and I've never changed characters at the rapid speed that you see in **No Child...**

GL: Why did you decide to perform it alone?

NS: Teachers often tell me that they feel as if they're doing a one-person show in front of their classrooms every day. They are run ragged. I wanted to recreate that feeling in the show – I don't drink water, I barely sit down, I just keep going.

GL: When I watch the show, I'm also reminded that role-play is integral to life as a student or teacher; teachers have to perform for their students, and students have to assume identities to conform socially.

NS: I'm always aware of that when I begin a residency, but hopefully the masks begin to peel off the longer you interact with the kids. All of them have some kind of identity that they are hiding behind, but when you get underneath, you see how beautiful and vulnerable these kids and teachers are.

GL: You trained as an actor and writer. How did you become a teaching artist?

NS: In 1998, I was working with the National Shakespeare Company, performing *Romeo and Juliet* for high school students. After the show, we would pair off in the classrooms and teach Shakespeare's language for an hour. It was then that I started to notice what life was like in a public school. I went to a Catholic school for thirteen years, and that was very different.

GL: How was it different?

NS: Discipline was really lacking in the public schools. Some of the kids couldn't sit still for fifteen minutes. One day they were going to be the adults of America, and I was concerned for their future and for our communities. I wanted to get them out of some of the patterns that are harming them – constantly talking in class, lack of attention, negative remarks to their teachers or about themselves. That environment creates a whirlpool of darkness. That's the reason I started teaching.

GL: How does theater help them?

NS: It allows the students to place themselves in another person's shoes, in another person's life, and they become a little more empathetic. They start to understand what it means for one person, one teacher, to have to control thirty students. We don't teach empathy much in our society – we focus on ourselves. We value an independence of spirit, which is great until you have to work in a group. The theater also allows them to still be kids, to have fun. A lot of the time, especially in the inner city, their childhood is taken away so early. They become this weird person who looks like an adult and acts like a child, and they don't really know where they fit in. Theater helps them to connect with the beautiful child they have inside them – it's almost metaphysical. I don't say that to them, of course, because then I hear, "I ain't

gonna be no child,” all that kind of stuff, but that’s really what it’s about. Allowing them to play as children play, at that innocent time in your life when you believed in magic and imagination and you weren’t too cool for all of that.

GL: It’s interesting that you mention empathy, because one of the extraordinary things about your performance is the empathy you show for each character, down to the janitor and the security guard who mans the metal detectors at the school doors.

NS: People don’t always realize that when you walk into a school, the kids are really funny. It’s easy to imagine that public schools are scary, but most of the time the kids are joking around and having a really good time. Some audience members come to the show, and I can see in their eyes, “Why is she making fun of black kids?” I just want to say to them, “Come with me. I’m not exaggerating; I’m doing 10 percent of what they actually do.”

GL: How much of **No Child...** is based on real incidents?

NS: The whole script is shaped from events that have happened to me. It’s an amalgamation of all my experiences.

GL: Many teachers saw the show while you performed it in New York. How do they respond?

NS: Often they tell me that I encapsulate their years working in the schools. New teachers come in and say, “That’s exactly what I’m going through, and I’m so glad I saw your show because now I have some ideas about what I can do with the kids when certain things happen.” The best way to teach teachers is for them see a teacher failing and succeeding, doing a great job and then messing up.

GL: You’ve performed **No Child...** more than four hundred times in New York City. Are you curious about how it will be received in Boston?

NS: Yes. Teachers have come from all over the country and said they’d like me to bring the show to their cities. Boston is interesting to me because the school system is as segregated as in New York. The situations in the classroom are very similar.

GL: Can we talk about the title? How do you feel about the **No Child Left Behind Act**?

NS: It leaves a lot to be desired. The amount of testing required for schools to receive their funding weighs heavily on teachers’ minds. Not every school is the same, and the standardized testing creates huge pressures. As teaching artists we can’t spend enough time in the classroom, because the students have to learn to take tests. Also, the arts don’t appear in the language of the act, and that’s troublesome. To eliminate the arts from our schools would be a tragedy. If I were ever to speak to the president of the United States, I’d argue that the arts create well-rounded individuals and better, more questioning citizens.

GL: **No Child...** so clearly reminds us that the problems in our education system are of vast proportions. Do you feel any hope for the future?

NS: Yes I do. We have to remain hopeful for the kids’ sake. Can you imagine being a teenager and having adults looking at you and saying, “I have no hope for you, teenager”? We have to focus on a hopeful future for them. We’re not helping them at all by regarding them as a lost generation.

A play (within a play): Our Country's Good by Lila Neugebauer

In **NO CHILD...**, Nilaja Sun chooses to rehearse the play **Our Country's Good** with the students of Malcolm X High School. Written in 1988 by playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker, **Our Country's Good** is set in the first British penal colony, located in Australia, in 1788. This text might seem like a surprising choice--the world of Wertenbaker's play appears altogether disparate from the life of the inner-city students Sun teaches. Yet her selection is deliberate, and the parallels are striking.

Based on the novel *The Playmaker* by Thomas Keneally, **Our Country's Good** tells the story of a group of convicts and marines sent to live in a penal colony. The action of the play centers around Lieutenant Ralph Clark's efforts to stage a production of George Farquar's restoration comedy, *The Recruiting Officer*, with a cast of convicts. Initially Ralph faces opposition from his commanding officers, who doubt the convicts' capacity to grasp or appreciate high art. Yet Ralph proposes that introducing these convicts to the elevated realm of the theatre might afford them the opportunity to change: in speaking the words of a great writer, the convicts could become enlightened and refined performers. Together with Captain Arthur, Ralph argues that the transcendent force of art could make a difference in all of their lives, convicts, and officers alike.

Why does Sun select a play about convicts? She asks herself this very question on her train ride home from her first day at Malcolm X High ("These kids aren't convicts. The kids in Rikers are convicts."). One of her students, Jerome, offers a thoughtful answer: "Because we're treated like convicts every day." Like the prisoners in the Australian penal colony, little is expected of the self-proclaimed "worst class in the school," students who have repeatedly been told they won't amount to anything. And though these young people initially resist Sun's teachings, they eventually rise to the occasion and to her expectations. For a group of students so often ignored, performing **Our Country's Good** provides an empowering opportunity to be seen and heard. As Captain Arthur articulates the transformative power of theatre, so Jerome's recitation of Arthur's speech has precisely that effect: Jerome becomes a captivating performer, and Sun, in watching him, finds the drive to continue working on the play. Engaging with the theatre transports Sun's students--much like the prisoners--beyond the confines of their everyday lives. Just as Arthur and Ralph argue in **Our Country's Good**, a journey into the world of a play allows both performers and audience to transcend their circumstances by activating their imaginations.

Definition of a Teaching Artist from Partnering Successfully with Schools Today: A teaching artist is an artist who teaches and integrates his/her art form into arts and non-arts curricula. Teaching artists are professional artists who integrate their art forms, perspectives, and skills into a wide range of Educational settings. Teaching artists work with schools, after school programs, and social service agencies. They have become important practitioners and advocates for arts organizations that wish to expand their direct contact with the public or with schools. The creative Arts in Education movement grew from teaching artists.

Post-Show Discussion Questions for No Child...:

1. When the play begins, Nilaja Sun portrays the school janitor. Why do you think she chose to open the production with this character's voice?
2. How does the janitor describe the teaching profession? Do you agree with the description? Why or why not?
3. What aspects of Ms. Sun's voice and body does she employ to indicate that she is switching from character to character in her performance?
4. Based on what you saw in the first scenes of *No Child...*, briefly explain the distinction between a classroom teacher and a teaching artist. If you knew you had to perform one of these jobs, which would you prefer? Why?
5. What relationship does Ms. Tam have with the students in her classroom? Do the students remind you of anyone you know? Which teenagers do you relate to the most?
6. *No Child...* includes frequent references to the students passing through the metal detector to enter and exit school. Would you consider this a metaphor? Why or why not?
7. Midway through the performance, the janitor provides an overview of the school's history and ends his monologue with the following sentences:

"I don't know nothing about no No Child, Yes Child, Who Child, What Child. I do know there's a hole in the fourth floor ceiling ain't been fixed since '87, all the bathrooms on the third floor, they broke. Now who's accountable for dat?"

How much do you know about your own school's history? How would you describe your school's current economic situation? For example, what about its ability to access resources or fix things that are broken?

8. What obstacles does Ms. Sun encounter when she attempts to hold rehearsals for **Our Country's Good**? Are these obstacles ones that you have faced in your own school when you have been working on a project, play, or team?
9. What reasons does the principal give for not wanting Ms. Sun quit? Were you surprised by any of them?
10. When the students and Ms. Sun finally stage the play, what discoveries does she make about some of her cast members?
11. Why do you think Ms. Sun felt the need to write and perform **No Child...**? How does the final scene affect you? What feelings or thoughts are you left with at the end of the play?

No Child... Learning Activities

In **No Child...** , Nilaja Sun plays many different characters. Each character has his or her own point of view on the subject of education.

Exercise #1: Character Point of View

Step 1: Choose a topic: Make a list of three issues around school and/or education that are important to you. They can be specific to your school or more general ideas about the education system in America.

Example:

- 1) School starts too early in the morning
- 2) This school should teach Latin
- 3) There should be more art in the classroom

Choose one of these issues and write three paragraphs on why this issue is important to you and what should be done to change it.

Step 2: Share this with a classmate or read them for the entire class.

Step 3: Find the opposing argument: Imagine another character that would oppose the argument you made in Step 1. This could be another student, a teacher, an administrator, a parent, a city council member, anyone. Make a list of the reasons explaining why they do not agree with your argument. Write three paragraphs explaining their point of view on this issue.

Step 4: Share this letter with a classmate or read them for the entire class.

Exercise #2: Creating Character

Now we will create characters to represent these arguments in monologues and scenes. In the play, No Child..., Nilaja Sun plays herself, as well as other characters. You can choose to play yourself or make up a new name for the character that has your point of view.

Step 1: Each character should have a profile. Create a profile by answering the following:

- Name Want (the character's greatest desire, as it relates to issues)
- Age (raised in exercise #1)
- Job Fear (the character's deepest fear)

Here is an example:

Character 1: You

Name: Dave

Age: 16

Job: Student

Want: Better Quality School lunch

Fear: Lack of nutrients = no learning

Step 2: Then create another profile for a character with an opposing point of view.

Character 2: Another point of view

Name: Ms. Warner

Age: 62

Job: School Principal

Want: To keep costs in line

Fear: She must lay off good teachers

Exercise #2: Scene Creation

Imagine a scene in which these 2 characters have an opportunity to discuss one of the important issues that you have raised in Exercise #1.

Step 1: Choose a Time, Place and At Rise for the scene

Time: When does the scene take place

Place: Where does the scene take place

At Rise: What does the audience see when the curtain raises or the lights go up

Example:

Time: 12:00pm Noon April 15, 2007

Place: School Cafeteria

At Rise: Student has fallen asleep while studying. GGP enters

Step 2: Create a scene as shown below, letting the conflict between the 2 characters unfold in their own voices.

Time: When does the scene take place?

Place: Where does the scene take place?

At Rise: What does the audience see when the curtain rises or the lights go up?

Step 3: Invent a reason for the characters to meet and discuss the issue.

For example:

Dave: (*speaking to the lunch attendant*) Hey, where is my pizza?

Principal: Excuse me young man. Please do not be so rude our staff. They work very hard.

Dave: (*turning to speak to the other character*) Why don't you mind...Oh, I'm sorry Ms. Warner. I didn't realize it was you.

Principal: No, I don't think you realize a lot of things, young man.

Dave: With all due respect, I realize that this food is not edible. Why can't we have organic vegetables like they have over at King Middle School?

Principal: This food has been certified by the state and it is quite edible enough for you, Mr. Smith.

Step 4: And continue the scene to find a resolution to the conflict.

Step 5: Once the scene is complete, read through it with a partner.

Step 6: Perform the scenes for the class.

Note: You can write more than two characters if it will serve the scene, but be sure that you write a profile for each character.

Performing Solo

Students can also perform these scenes using one actor. That actor needs to change his or her voice and physicality to portray each different character in the scene.

Who is Lela Elam?



Lela Elam performs 16 different roles in **NO CHILD** by Nilaja Sun, directed by Joseph Adler at GABLESTAGE **APRIL 18 thru MAY 17**
PHOTO © GEORGE SCHIAVONE

LELA ELAM is so happy to be back at GableStage again working with the amazing Joe Adler. Previous work at GableStage includes *In The Continuum* for which she received the Carbonell Best Actress, The Miami NewTimes Best Actress and Miami SunPost Best Actress Awards, and *Intimate Apparel* for which she was nominated for the Carbonell Best Supporting Actress Award. Lela has also worked at New Theatre in their productions of *Fill Our Mouths* which was named Best Ensemble by The Miami NewTimes, *Just A Kiss* for which she received The Miami SunPost Best Comedy Performance Female Honor, and *Touch* for which she received the Carbonell Best Supporting Actress nomination. Lela has also had the opportunity to be in five August Wilson plays, including *Radio Golf* at Mosaic Theatre which was nominated for the Carbonell Best Ensemble Award, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Seven Guitars*, *Two Trains Running*, and *The Piano Lesson*, all at The M Ensemble Company. Lela recently had the pleasure of working in Key West at the beautiful Waterfront Playhouse in their production of *Doubt*, as well as Ground Up and Rising's production of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Lela's work with Ft. Lauderdale's The Women's Theatre Project includes, *Jar The Floor*, which was named one of the Top Five shows of last season by Miami Herald's Christine Dolen, *Shiloh Rules*, *Tongue of a Bird*, *Necessary Targets*, and their premiere production of *The Anastasia Trials in the Court of Women*. Lela also appeared in the film *Hearing Huny*, which won the 48 Hour Film Project's Miami 2008 Audience Favorite Award, and the soon-to-be-released film *Know Thy Enemy*.

Character Breakdown



In **NO CHILD...** Nilaja Sun appears as sixteen different characters. The following is a guide to those characters, in order of appearance:

- 1) **Janitor Baron** - *in his eighties*, long-time janitor at Malcolm X High school, the play's narrator
- 2) **Ms. Sun** - *in her thirties*, a teaching artist
- 3) **Ms. Tam** - *in her twenties*, a teacher at Malcolm X High School
- 4) **Coca** - *sixteen*, student
- 5) **Jerome** - *eighteen*, student
- 6) **Brian** - *sixteen*, student
- 7) **Shondrika** - *sixteen*, student
- 8) **Xiomara** - *sixteen*, student
- 9) **Jose** - *seventeen*, student
- 10) **Chris** - *fifteen*, student
- 11) **Mrs. Kennedy** - Malcolm X High School Principal
- 12) **Security Guard** - monitors the metal detector at Malcolm X High School, Jamaican
- 13) **Philip** - *sixteen*, student
- 14) **Mrs. Projensky** - a substitute teacher at Malcolm X High School, Russian
- 15) **Mr. Johnson** - a new teacher at Malcolm X High School
- 16) **Dona Guzman** - *in her seventies*, Jose's grandmother

Who is Nilaja Sun?



(Carol Rosegg - Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company)

Nilaja Sun is the solo writer and performer of the off-Broadway smash **No Child...**, which concluded its run at the Barrow Street Theatre last June. For her creation and performance of **No Child...**, Nilaja garnered a Lucille Lortel Award, Outer Critics Circle Awards for Outstanding Solo Performance and Outstanding New American Play, a Theatre World Award, and an Obie Award. The piece was also named Best One-Person Show at the US Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen. She was Epic Theatre Ensemble's first-ever artistic associate, and has appeared in *Einstein's Gift*, **No Child...**, *Pieces of the Throne*, and *Time and the Conways* with the company. Her other New York credits include *The Adventures of the Barrio Grrrl!* at Summer Play Festival, *The Cook* at INTAR, *Huck and Holden* at Cherry Lane Theatre, and *Law and Order: SVU*. Nilaja most recently completed work on Columbia Pictures' upcoming film *The International*, starring Naomi Watts and Clive Owen. As a solo performer, her projects include *Black and Blue*, the critically acclaimed *Blues for a Gray Sun* at INTAR, *Due to the Tragic Events of...*, *Insufficient Fare*, *La Nubia Latina*, and *Mixtures*. A native of the Lower East Side, she is a Princess Grace Award winner and has worked as a teaching artist in New York for nine years.

Resources for Arts in Education:

Alameda County Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership
www.artiseducation.org

Americans for the Arts Online Resource Center
www.artsusa.org/services/arts_education/resource_center/

Arts Education Partnership

aep-arts.org (click on "Resources")

No Subject Left Behind: A Guide to Arts Education Opportunities in the 2001 NCLB Act
www.aep-arts.org/files/advocacy/NoSubjectLeftBehind2005.pdf

California Alliance for Arts Education
www.artsed411.org/educate/resources.aspx

CAAE's Status of Arts Education in CA Public schools (a little out-of-date but helpful)
www.artsed411.org/involved/status.stm

An Unfinished Canvas. Arts Education in California:
Taking Stock of Policies and Priorities

policyweb.sri.com/cep/projects/displayProject.jsp?Nick=artsed

What the No Child Left Behind Law Means for Your Child sfgate.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/205

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