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Speaking of Justice: Telling the Story to Reach the Goal

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“Understanding your world and the impact it has on you and the impact you have on it” is what Yolanda Fleischer believes is central to the concept of social justice. The quest for this understanding guided the creation of *Unheard Voices: Homeless Monologues*, a 2010 original production developed and directed by Fleischer, retired professor of theater at the University of Detroit Mercy.

In 2008, homelessness was nothing new in Metro Detroit, but with the economic downturn of the time, more people found themselves in need and in search of help wherever it might be available, from public agencies to nonprofit shelters and food pantries to sidewalks and traffic lights at busy intersections.

Increasing opportunities to witness the suffering of the homeless raised common questions for Fleischer and her colleagues: Who is responsible for this problem and who is responsible for solving it? Am I responsible?

Unheard Voices: Homeless Monologues developed out of conversations around these questions.

Over the course of 40 seasons, the Theatre Company, now a part of the performing arts department at UDM, had developed a preference for topics of justice and social change.

Fleischer and her colleagues took inspiration from the work of such socially-missioned artists as Eve Ensler (whose *Vagina Monologues* the Theatre Company has co-produced several times) and Anna Deavere Smith, who has asked: “What is the gap between understanding and action? And what does it take to bridge the gap?”

Under Professor Fleischer’s direction, the Theatre Company sent trained volunteers to 30 homeless shelters throughout Southeast Michigan with the goal of making

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connections and finding personal stories that could illustrate the roots of homelessness.

Fleischer says, “They were not just getting the words of [a homeless] person but they were talking to the person and getting the answers. They were also taking notes about how they ‘read’ that person, what they felt about them and what that person’s soul was. This is important: [the performers] were not going to imitate the person but they should channel them, recreating them and giving them a voice.” Stories of those experiencing homelessness emerged and, with permission, the Theatre Company composed original monologues to bring their stories to light.

Through empathetic portrayal of people living on society’s fringes, the goal of *Unheard Voices* was to present the lives, hopes, pains, and spirit of the homeless community, to inspire justice, and to help dissolve negative prejudices surrounding the homeless.

Historically, the theater has existed not only for entertainment and performance but also as an essential cultural vehicle for social communication and reflection: a place where we can come together to examine life, ponder our place in history, and begin to define our individual and collective identity. Theater can awaken our awareness, promote social change, and foster a fuller and more human conversation among all people.

How do we bridge the gap between understanding and action?

Providing art that inspires awareness and conversation is a good start. ■

Greg Grobis is assistant professor in the performing arts department and director of marketing and management for that department at the University of Detroit Mercy.