Nicholas James – HPAC 6001 – Touring Theatre – Task 2
In what ways can touring theatre affect its audience in terms of addressing social, political and cultural issues? Base your response on your specific piece of theatre you are creating.

Touring theatre provides the unique advantage and opportunity to bring community-oriented artistry to the communities in question. The direct vector of provided access is an important catalyst for theatre's capability to influence a population's perception of not only a given issue, but of the medium of live theatre itself. Touring theatre, in many ways, breaks the established balanced of the practice's mystique. Whereas theatre has cultivated, to many, a reputation in the public eye of being an art form exclusive to the upper-class elites or possessing an otherwise pretentious demeanor, touring theatre's mobility allows it to break some of this engrained cultural bias through width of accessibility. This independence is counter to As Downing notes:

> *"We have lived so long with the conventional view that only a culturally aware elite would want to attend theatre that even those committed to social inclusion can forget the potential attractiveness of theatre for everyone. There may be some with a subconscious, even conscious, resistance to the idea of just anyone attending theatre, and others have come to assume that 'they' just wouldn't want to come - even that it may be patronising to invite 'them'. On the other side of this barrier, there are those who have not been brought up with or introduced to theatre and who believe that they would not be welcome over the threshold."*

This perception can become an obstacle for traditional institutional theatre, at least in its capacity for productive dialogue, as it requires the attendees to take the initiative to seek out and consume the art in an establishment with the express purpose of theatre, also requiring their community to have the infrastructure and communal interest to support native theatrical endeavors. By bringing a typically stationary art form into forums and locales with non-artistically dedicated function, touring theatre is accessible to spaces where public artistic participation is not a regular function. In this production, the communities in question are primary schools and late-grate elementary students, where the format of theatre has extraordinary potential to engage young minds in critical thought through imagination, even on large-scale issues with great nuance. As Philip notes in his dissection of the artistic resurgence of post-9/11 New York City.

> "*Applied theatre work is commissioned where artists generate scenarios and create opportunities for the community to respond to their pain through the theatre work. In a local elementary school children tell their stories of how it was for them to witness these events firsthand from their classroom window. They render their stories into dramatic form. Play texts are written which serve as catalysts for discussion and for further theatre work. Audiences who observe this work share their own stories in post-performance workshops. The theatre becomes a way for the community to examine their own relationship to the shocking events of the attack. In this new form of community theatre, people can directly apply the art form to assist in their own reconstruction of identity. This community theatre is vital to the process of healing, and enables the people to share their narratives of pain and hope.*"

Though addressing issues of less dire potency than this understanding of the advantages presented by touring theatre, the specific application of this production in particular becomes clearer. The very conceptual apparatus of the issue of plastic pollution is complicated and convoluted at best to grasp, even to adult demographics in plain discussion, so the task of providing a functionally practical lens of judgement for younger audiences poses an even greater challenge. Much of young children's' formation of apparatuses for real-world judgement and decision making can be directly linked to

lessons learned through mediums that engage the imaginative process, be that literature, animation, film, new media, etc. The uninhibited capacity for imagination far outweighs the lack of 'practical' knowledge and can be used to bypass a lack of experience in order to build, through shared belief, an understanding of complex issues can be developed through the active, specifically targeted engagement of imagination. As Gallagher and Booth observe of educational theatre for young children:

> *"For most children, such performances in the gym, with poor acoustics, minimal lighting, uncomfortable seating, and powerful theatre are perhaps the only ones that they will experience in their lives. Many of the plays chosen for their intent to entertain, but also for their mission to 'educate.'"*

In this manner theatrical expression provides an important tool for the ignition of critical thought in younger audiences, the ability to utilize the plentiful imagination of childhood in its examination of aspects of core issues re-conceptualized to figurative circumstances to allow individual critical thought in a manner that doesn't feel infantilizing to the audience. The hope, with this production in particular, is that using the increased outreach and capability for honest communication to more easily ignite the imaginations of the audience, the piece can communicate the proximity of the issue at hand with an honesty that allows understanding even in the younger audiences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Downing, D. - In Our Neighbourhood: a Regional Theatre and its Local Community
Taylor, Philip - Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community
Gallagher & Booth – How Theatre Educates, Convergences & Counterpoints