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ON EDUCATION

# One-Woman Show Holds Up a Mirror to Teachers' Lives

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

Six rows from the stage, Dan Lilienthal took his seat, placing his messenger's satchel carefully between his feet. It contained his weekly planner, a couple of novels he was reading with his sixth graders, and a textbook from the graduate-school class he was taking. The bag went everywhere with him, even to the theater on Saturday night, when some people thought teachers didn't work.

In Mr. Lilienthal's family, they knew otherwise. For nearly four generations, from his grandmother to his younger cousins, his relatives have been teachers, eight in all. Even now, he was sitting next to his sister Dana, who taught at a junior high on Long Island. They had both heard their mother say so many times: "This is a noble profession. Hard, but noble."

Around them, the lights dimmed and then rose in the Barrow Street Theater in Greenwich Village, and Nilaja Sun went into her one-woman show, "No Child." She played every part in the story of a drama teacher, not unlike herself, trying to coax, cajole and inspire a Bronx class to perform a play.

And then came this one particular scene. One of the students had stopped going to school, just days before he was supposed to be in the class play. Ms. Sun kept calling the boy's home, leaving messages, all unanswered. Finally, reaching a grandmother who spoke only Spanish, she teased out the explanation: the student's brother had been killed by a gang.

For Mr. Lilienthal, looking on, the membrane between fact and fiction dissolved. He thought of that boy in his sixth-grade class who was 13, and still reading at second-grade level. One day he started shouting, kicking over chairs and climbing onto a tabletop. Mr. Lilienthal took him out of the classroom and to a computer lab, and told him to write about what was bothering him.

When Mr. Lilienthal checked on the boy later in the period, he saw on the computer screen the letters "R.I.P." and the words "sunrise" and "sunset," each followed by a date. The boy asked him how to spell "remembering." His cousin, 20 years old, had just died. That loss, Mr. Lilienthal realized, was what the day's outburst had been all about.

Now, on a Saturday night in an Off Broadway theater, Ms. Sun and "No Child" were reassuring Mr. Lilienthal that he was not alone. The struggles he felt were not just a function of being a first-year teacher in a tough neighborhood like Brooklyn's Red Hook. They went with the work he had chosen.

"Just to realize how common it is," he said a few days later, ruminating on the play. "So many teachers in a city school have a kid who's lost somebody. When a kid's acting out, you learn it's because of something severe. So you need to be extra compassionate and extra persistent. You need to be there even if the student doesn't come seeking you out."

In six months and 170 performances, "No Child" has served this confirming and cathartic role for thousands of teachers. While the show has been lavishly praised by drama critics, these educators are the ultimate experts. The symphony of murmurs and sighs one hears from them during the show, the raucous laughter at jokes that elude the general public, attest to just how accurately Ms. Sun has held her mirror to their lives.

It is her own life, too, for "No Child" grew out of the eight years she spent as a guest artist in New York's public schools. During the last two — divided between [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) High School in Manhattan and the Bronx High School for Writing and Communication Arts — the

state arts council and the Epic Theater Center underwrote Ms. Sun with the goal of developing a one-woman show.

“When I wrote the piece, I thought I’d be doing it for three weeks for the standard theatergoing audience,” Ms. Sun recalled. “But by the third preview, I started to get this sense of teachers enveloping this show.”

She has performed “No Child” for several hundred teachers at events in Rochester and at [Hofstra University](#) on Long Island. The teachers’ union in New York City had her do the show at a training session for new teachers. The schools chancellor, [Joel I. Klein](#), attended one night. More typically, teachers in small groups find their way to Barrow Street, drawn both by word-of-mouth and \$20 last-minute tickets for educators.

After one performance, a teacher approached Ms. Sun to confide, “I have kids who are doing great things and I have kids who are in jail for murder and I don’t know how to help them.” Another time, a mother introduced her son to Ms. Sun and said, “My child is one of the ones left behind.”

MS. SUN knows the teachers are out there by the sound. She hears the knowing laughter when, in the role of the principal, she says, “We need all these kids to pass five Regents in the next two months.” It happens again when the class revolts against doing the play and the principal retaliates by threatening to ban them from the school trip to Great Adventure.

For all its humor, though, “No Child” is no palliative. At one point in the show, Ms. Sun as the drama teacher tries to resign. “I came to teaching to touch lives and educate and be this enchanting artist in the classroom,” she says, “and I have done nothing but lose 10 pounds in a month and develop a disgusting smoking habit. These kids need something much greater than anything I can give them. They need a miracle — and they need a miracle like every day.”

A 25-year-old in charge of conjuring those miracles, Mr. Lilienthal understood the emotion all too well. So he took some sustenance from the fact that Ms. Sun did wind up staying and putting on the class play.

“You come across this resistance and it shatters your idealism,” he said. “You experience this immediate frustration — how far below grade level the kids are and the way they’re acting out. You start to wonder why you’re teaching. You get so disillusioned. So just to know that Nilaja Sun was able to bring her passion to the students, and that it worked. You have a curriculum to teach, but you need to bring yourself.”

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