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OUTSIDE EVALUATION OF THE NEW HORIZONS PROGRAM

— by Eugene Hughes

From the beginning and throughout its presentation, "The Oil Patch and the Community — Contrast in Relations" revealed careful and thoughtful planning. The result was a graceful, tactful examination of emotional and controversial issues. Only the most sensitive perceptions could have produced a

program which confronted all the issues without being offensive or chauvinistic. One of the most remarkable aspects of the presentation was its judicious balance of control and spontaneity. The format was designed to insure the relevance and focus necessary without discouraging free discussion. Indeed, the extemporaneous scenes presented by "Rapid

Editor's note: One innovative educational tool is the improvisational theater group. On October 21, 1982, in Weatherford's Blair Hall a seminar-workshop was co-sponsored by the Oklahoma Humanities Council, New Horizons, and Rapid Reactions. Published here is Dr. Hughes' evaluation of the program.

PERSPECTIVES

Reactions," a major part of the program, were themselves examples of the pervasive "planned spontaneity" of the entire program. The planned — but not "canned" — responses from humanists and other community figures planted throughout the audience contributed to this sense of audience participation rather than passive reception of rehearsed scripts. The effect was that of having shared in a genuine exchange of real views, of a sincere "town meeting" without the irrelevance and lack of focus typical of such occasions.

The confrontation between the small, conservative community which had changed little in the past decade and the boom town resulting from the town's finding itself suddenly in the middle of the "oil patch" was a dramatic one. The presentation reflected the drama in its "time travel" format, in which members of the audience recalled their apprehensions and anticipations of the coming boom in 1980. For the most part, the community feared and resented the bustling, unfamiliar intrusions of oil patch economy and culture into its placid, rural, unlocked-doors atmosphere. People worried about rapid changes, about rising crime rates, about erosion of traditional values. There was concern that the community could not absorb the numbers of new citizens by providing adequate housing, education, and social services.

Some people, it is true, welcomed the changes, but their motives sometimes suggested other problems. There were inevitable signs of greed, of selfishness at the prospect of new riches around the corner. Priorities often became warped; the "let me get mine" attitude at times led to a narrow "everybody for himself" attitude toward social problems.

As the oil boom grew, some of the fears became realities. Increased traffic brought frustrations, noise, and road damage. Schools and churches did, indeed, find themselves poorly equipped to meet the greatly increased burdens placed upon them. All social service institutions were confronted with new problems in addition to the sheer numbers of people. Much of the new population was transient. Families were separated and/or uprooted, leading to insecurities, anxieties, and the absence of stable and traditional norms. The result was unprecedented social upheaval: high divorce rates, indigence, child neglect and abuse, and other forms of crime and social displacement. Mental health organizations, churches, charities, social service organizations, etc. found themselves challenged with the number and varieties of demands upon their services.

Not only were the new members of the community uneasy because of their own sudden rootlessness, but their problems were increased by the frequent stereotype rejection they encountered of all "oilies." Mutual suspicion, even contempt, prevailed. The community felt itself threatened by "oil field trash," and the newcomers saw themselves exploited by greedy landowners and businesses.

One particularly poignant problem was expressed by a representative of the Native Americans in the area. Many Indians, accustomed to a lifetime of need, of inadequate lives supported mostly by public welfare, suddenly

find themselves wealthy. Unable to cope with these new riches, they abandon traditional values with devastating personal and family results. There were no suggestions for improving this sad situation.

The strife was not limited to conflict between different cultures, however. Within the established community there arose new tensions and frustrations. Sometimes local farmers and business persons resented each other, suspecting that one profited more than another from the new riches. Unrealistic expectations of what the new wealth would achieve in improved roads and other governmental services led to suspicions of graft, misappropriations of funds, etc.

But the program also looked ahead, after taking stock of the results of all these disturbances. As one speaker put it, "The oil crisis has been a mirror to the community, showing us our weaknesses and strengths." The consensus seems to be that the experience was a useful one. (After all, the community shortcomings were articulated by members of the community itself.) The members of the community now perceive that they emphasized short-term goals too much. They now see that the "oilies" are not essentially different from them. They have been exposed to "outsiders" and survived, perhaps even grown. They now recognize some of their fears as having been narrow provincialism. Having been through this change, the community perceives itself better able to handle future changes by proceeding from sounder values with more concern for long-range effects.

That this new confidence will soon be tested is already clear. As the oil boom wanes, new problems are developing: unemployment with all its social implications; a rapid exodus of population, with concomitant economic shocks throughout the community. But it was clear from the responses that the new challenges are being faced positively, confidently, without the resentment and suspicion that heralded the oil boom in 1980. The community has found that it can adjust and adapt; that the oilies can become a part of existing order with profit to both; that while any change brings spectacular problems, it also promotes a great many quiet improvements. Women, in particular, are seen to play a significant role in this adaptation, and examples were given which demonstrated how women have risen above the frustrations of cultural changes to sustain the traditional values of established society.

As one speaker said, the community can now "risk loving." It has been shown its weaknesses and its strengths, and the experience has been a healthy one.

To the extent that humanism is an examination of human values in crisis, of community mores, of human motives and psychology, of human beings studying themselves as interacting creatures, this program was thoroughly and fundamentally humanistic. In view of the subject, the program necessarily emphasized sociological and psychological concerns. An effort was made to place the issues in historical perspective and to indicate their implications for the future. Two humanistic concerns which the program called for

— literature and philosophy — were almost entirely omitted. The academic philosopher was ill and the literature representative was unable to participate, thus accounting for these last minute omissions, presumably. In one sense, however, the arts — particularly the performing arts and the literature associated with them — dominated the program in a subtle manner. The dramatizations of the issues by "Rapid Reactions" were as interesting as art as they were relevant social commentary. The actors were skillful and knowledgeable, insuring that their performances were both entertaining and relevant. (Only once did it seem that relevance was briefly sacrificed for effect.) The "scenes" dramatized the issues which had been identified by the humanists and other members of the audience, giving them a pertinence and a feeling of expressing the immediate concerns of those present. Indeed, often the situations, characters, and attitudes were generated directly from the audience, which was necessarily involved. As the audience was informed at the beginning of the program, the extemporaneous performances by "Rapid Reactions" are in the distinguished tradition of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*. It was obvious from the program and from conversations with those involved that the goals of the Oklahoma Humanities Committee shaped the content of the program.

In retrospect, the entire evening seems to have been carefully orchestrated. But the orchestration was so subtle that there was no sense of artificiality or manipulation. This effect can only have resulted from long and intelligent preparation on the part of the director, the consultants, and the participants. It was a program that the Oklahoma Humanities Committee and the members of the project can all be proud of. ■

