

“I’m Gonna Use It To Tell You”: Self-Reflection and Construction of Self

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ABSTRACT

For seven weeks, I worked with thirteen high school girls to explore issues of identity through a devised theatre performance. Throughout the process, I found evidence that the process of working through theatre mitigated the ways young people filter their responses and provides a platform in which they can interrogate their perceptions and opinions. This article discusses how, while working through theatre provided a space in which the girls I worked with expressed uncensored thoughts and opinions, there was a return to constructed personas when creating a public performance.

At 3:15 p.m. on July 5th, 2016, in a basement rehearsal studio in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, eleven high school girls were

writing about their identities. Some had cleared spaces on the room's single table, shoving aside the stacks of permission slips and loose-leaf paper. Others perched on folding chairs, leaned over the windowsill, or sat on the floor, notebooks propped in their laps.

Within a few days, the girls would number thirteen. In the weeks that followed, we would work to create a full length, original theatre performance through writing, improvisation, theatre activities, and discussion. The girls wrote close to two hundred poems, monologues, dialogues, and diatribes. They improvised and created dozens of scenes. They talked with me and with each other. They experimented with theatrical structures and with forms of writing. By the end of seven weeks, they had written, rehearsed, and presented a twenty-six page script, and I had a stack of script pages, writing, field notes, memos, and transcripts.

For my dissertation study, I worked with thirteen high school girls for seven weeks to create an original performance. For three hours a day, three days a week, the girls experimented with scene work, movement, poetry, and dialogue. After three weeks, they looked over their work to identify throughlines and themes. From there, they developed and rehearsed a final performance: a collage of theatrical scenes and spoken word pieces. They presented their work in a professional theatre space to an invited audience. Each performance was followed by a facilitated talkback.

This study was done in collaboration with an existing theatre program, Summer Theatre Experience (STE).¹ We began with thirteen girls—Mazzie, Ashley, Maya, Liz, Eva, Melanie, Anna, Asia, Janelle, Jordan, Akila, Mia, and Adriana—eight of whom identified as black, one as Dominican, one as Puerto Rican, one as South Asian, and two as mixed race. All the participating girls lived in Brooklyn and all attended public or charter high schools with free and reduced lunch rates of over 70%. Janelle and Jordan did not complete the program, although their writing was represented, with their permission, in the final performance.

My original research objective was to investigate the ways in which theatre creation might serve as qualitative method, providing potentially more nuanced data than might be achieved through traditional methods. While the resulting study yielded insight into the

¹ All names of organizations and participants are pseudonyms.

ways the participating girls viewed themselves and their peers, their thoughts about race, power, and personal agency, this article focuses on the ways in which this process served as a vehicle for self-reflection and personal understanding.

POWER OF THEATRE

As a former high school teacher, I have seen firsthand the ways in which participating in drama activities and creating theatre can be a catalyst for community building and self-reflection. Theatre of the Oppressed creator Augusto Boal refers to theatre as “a rehearsal for the revolution” (Boal, 1979, p. 122): the means by which an individual might train themselves for real-life action. I see theatre as a space in which personas might be tried on and strategies to various situations considered. One can experiment with relationships and attitudes without real world consequences. As drama is an inherently group activity, practitioners also have to learn to work effectively and productively with other people.

This study employed *devising*, the common theatrical term for the process by which a piece of theatre is created by and originates with a particular group. It is, in short, theatre that is generated, rather than starting with a script (Govan, Nicholson, & Normington, 2007; Oddey, 1994). While it is a collaborative process, there is no prescribed methodology to the form that collaboration might take (Bicât & Baldwin, 2013; Oddey, 1994).

Devising is well suited to examining individual experience, as it allows space for individual perspective and reflection (Oddey, 1994, 2007). I was able to introduce ideas, themes, and skills, but let the participating girls decide what themes and ideas they wanted to explore in more depth and which they wanted to leave behind. There were ample opportunities to incorporate full and small group conversations. Only writings the girls chose were included in drafts of the performance script, and throughout the rehearsal process, the girls had final say over the content and presentation.

When devising with young people, the workshop leader walks a fine line. On the one hand, the work is participant-generated. On the other, the facilitator, as an experienced theatre practitioner, has the responsibility of pushing the acting and production value to a higher level. For this study, I was teaching acting, production, and playwriting

skills as well as working to create a space in which students felt able to speak and write freely and honestly.

EXAMINING HONESTY

Researchers have found that adolescent girls often demonstrate the internalization of cultural expectations and stereotypes, even when challenging them. Researcher and arts practitioner Dana Edell (2010) describes this in detail in her doctoral research, which investigates the playmaking work of a similar demographic. Edell speaks of the mix of internalization and rebellion that often manifested in the girls' writing. Edell's conclusion that "uncensored" does "not mean unchecked and unquestioned" (p. 324) served as a reminder to me that these internalizations ran deep, and that open and honest discussion and communication was essential when working with the group. My responsibility during the first several workshops was to create a space in which the girls felt they were able to speak without judgment, while providing the kind of probing questions that would open space for deeper thinking.

At the end of our first week together, I set up a group conversation to discuss some of the themes that had come up so far in our work. I chose to structure this as a graffiti discussion, a common classroom strategy designed to facilitate equity of access. In a *graffiti discussion*, questions are posted around the room on large pieces of paper. Each student takes a marker and responds to each question on their own, then to each other's responses, all in writing. In this way, students have the chance to process and reflect before having to speak. They have the opportunity to read others' opinions and thoughts, which may spark new ideas of their own. For this discussion, instead of posting questions, I posted quotes and asked the girls to respond.

During this activity, I noticed we had reached a point where the girls were feeling comfortable asking each other to think more deeply and questioning their own responses. Under "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you," responses included:

Having to hold in your true identity is like drinking poison and expecting someone else to die—it is a lifetime of captivated angry. That is no way to live.

That is a great simile, but what does it truly uncover?

Agreed b/c when you hold something back it gets worse instead of it getting better.

I think it can make you super sad to hide your roots.

I agree because it's like when you're angry about something if you continue to hold it in and not let it out sooner or later you're going to explode and it's going to be crazy.

It's either we are forced by authority to not speak up, or we are scared. Sometimes we are not able to express ourself and that is caused by us not being able to have the courage to tell how they really feel. So they keep whatever they have balled up inside of their selves.

I'll admit that I do this a lot and I feel like it's second nature to me. I would rather keep it to myself instead of bothering someone else with my troubles.

The girls were starting to dig more deeply into each other's statements. asking what a quote really meant, or pointing out that perhaps no one is ever satisfied with 'who they are.' There were connections being made to personal experience and musings as to why such situations might occur.

While there were many thoughtful responses during the 'conversation,' there were also glib statements such as "negative influence leads to negative consequences" and "there's no such thing as normal." One recurring platitude I noticed was "just be yourself," in statements such as "Be happy with yourself," "I agree we should be comfortable being ourselves all the time," and "You can't become better or the person you'd like to be unless you're true to yourself and comfortable with who you are."

About halfway through the verbal discussion about what they had read and written, I pressed the girls on this point. "So here's a question I've been wondering," I said.

I see on a lot of these 'it's really important to be true to yourself'

and 'be happy with who you are'—there's a lot of those comments. So my question is, what if you can't? This says 'make decisions to be true to yourself', but what if what you want to do is not what your family wants? Or teachers? What if what's being expected of you is not what you want in that moment?

Eva was first to answer, saying she believed that this was a relevant question because, "I feel like teachers, they don't really understand your process of thinking." She went on to talk about her frustration with her school's expectation that she act in a specific way. Anna jumped in to agree and echo Eva's sentiments, mentioning college and, "I know we have to do it or whatever."

"Why?" I asked again. "Why do you have to?"

From there the girls took over the discussion while I stayed quiet. Janelle talked about her father leaving her mother to start another family, and how, while she knew he was 'following his heart,' she wondered if he could be completely happy after making that choice. She also talked about how she wasn't able to come out as bisexual to her religious mother, and that she would have to wait for a different time in her life to be fully herself. The girls talked about the difficulty of truly accepting others, the complications of pursuing artistic ambitions, and feeling torn between school and home culture. Although the conversation meandered in a variety of directions, the act of stopping, thinking, and having the space to try out new ideas seemed to move the girls away from glibness and into nuance.

The "be yourself" theme came up again over the course of the summer, and there was a great deal of that message in the final script. This conversation, though, marked a turning point. The girls were weighing consequences and possibilities and taking the time to examine their initial reactions to questions and statements. It felt as though when "be true to yourself" came up again, there was a deeper understanding of some of the complications behind the statement.

CONSTRUCTING PERSONAS

Through this process, I discovered a great deal about what these young people thought and felt about themselves. What was interesting, and what I had not anticipated, was that when the girls went through

the process of curating their work and deciding what they wanted to present, they also went through the process of making that performance presentable. The fact that there was an audience mattered to them; even knowing the audience was ostensibly there to witness their truth, the girls chose and constructed their public personas within the framework of that performance. Those personas included expressing vulnerability they may not have risked expressing six weeks earlier. They included anger and grief in ways the girls may have been previously unwilling or unable to publicly inhabit. However, the fact of an audience impacted the way in which those personas manifested. While the girls used the workshops to process, the final performance was what, ultimately, the girls wanted an audience to hear and experience.

The writing and scene work the girls created during our first workshop expressed many of the themes we explored over the next several weeks, including those our final show eventually centered around. The creation work our first day revolved around themes of 'rising above.' One group portrayed a figure literally breaking out of situation in which she was held down, the other a series of figures ascending. In both writing and creation, expressions of self-confidence were prevalent. The final show returned to these themes, to messages of 'I will not be brought down' and 'I will succeed.' It was a reversion to clichés, but, it seemed, clichés they wished to inhabit. In the world they created on stage, the girls recognized those things that made them angry, those things that made them frustrated, and then broke away from them, creating a unified, confident, 'see me' finale. While the girls wanted their dissatisfactions to be heard by their audience, they also wanted to be seen in a certain way.

Perhaps they weren't just telling their audience, but were also telling themselves. Perhaps there was an element of wish fulfillment embedded in what they presented. Edell (2013) notes that the young women she worked with often re-embodied oppression and presented stereotypes in their original performances. In some ways, this was the case here. It also seemed as though the girls were striving, in their conclusion, to portray their best selves. The performance felt like a mix of genuine expression and constructed narrative. However, there wasn't anything that didn't feel honest. They weren't lying, but they were also being careful about the way they were presenting themselves.

PROCESS, PRODUCT, AND IMPACT

In my experience as a classroom teacher and as a teaching artist, I have observed that the act of performing, particularly performing self-written work, has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for young people. But is it the process of creation, and of being part of a supportive community, that makes the experience a profound one? There is a specific kind of validation inherent in performance. Drama therapist Stephen Snow (2009) speaks to the particular benefits of performance: both the build up during the rehearsal period and the “intensity and concentration” creates an “effective, focused rite of passage” (p. 132). Snow contends that this final rite was essential in terms of bringing closure to participants and providing outside acknowledgment of their work. Although Snow was referring specifically to therapeutic experiences, the same argument could be made for any devising process: the final validation of presentation bringing closure and meaning. In our situation, one could argue that it was the process that contributed to any deeper understanding or insights the girls may have walked away from, but the performance still offered a culminating event, a public acknowledgment of their work together. As a researcher, I found both process and product valuable, particularly when comparing the two and examining the differences in the roles the girls inhabited on and off stage, but in terms of the impact the work had on the girls themselves, I think the performance made less of an impression than the work moving towards it.

Mia, for example, was engaged throughout the workshop process. While she wasn't always vocal during full group conversations, she often took on a leadership role in small group creation work and her feedback when reflecting on writing and scene work was thoughtful and insightful. She expressed interest in the process, contributing a great deal of writing to the final performance. At the post-show talkbacks, though, she was quiet, slumped in her chair. When an audience member asked the girls what impact the process had had on them, she replied, “I think this was a great experience, but it's not going to impact me on any type of way.” Were Mia's words merely disappointment that the program was ending, and she was returning to a school in which she was unhappy? Or did they speak to a greater sense of futility? Was she truly leaving the program unaffected in “any type of way?”

Asia, another otherwise largely silent presence during the

talkbacks, responded. “I agree with Mia,” she said. Mia elaborated, explaining how she didn’t think that the teachers from her school hearing her words would matter:

Honestly, I feel like [teachers in the audience] going back to the school and telling them about this place, ain’t gonna do that much ... Because they feel that what they’re doing is right.

Mia believed that even if the teachers in attendance told other teachers and administrators what the girls had communicated on stage, nothing would change, and Mia’s understanding of ‘impact’ was that something changes. She was leaving a seven-week process that culminated in constructing a message that she believed wouldn’t be heard. If we had not had a final performance, would Mia have expressed a different opinion about the way the work had impacted her? Did her understanding of the final performance as pointless color the entirety of the summer?

One of the girls, Mizzie, didn’t come to the second performance. While I found out later she had mentioned to a couple of the other girls that she would only be performing one of the two nights, she did not tell me that she would be absent. She had missed a week and a half of rehearsal time to attend another program and her speaking parts in the show were limited. Did Mizzie not feel invested in the project as a whole, having missed much of the writing of the script, or did this speak to the performance not being what she viewed as the ‘point’ of the program?

The potential of theatre as a means as a means of empowerment, particularly with marginalized communities and young people, has been written about extensively (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Sola, 2012; Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, 2014). Companies that work with young people through theatre use the word in their mission statements, testimonials, or “about” sections (Opening Act, n.d.; Marquee Youth, n.d). Did the girls find the performance empowering? They expressed pride at the conclusion of the performance. During the talkback, many expressed their general happiness that they had participated. Would the workshops on their own have accomplished that? Some may have needed the culmination, the public acknowledgement of what they have to say. For others, like Mia, the public nature of the final performance may have merely underscored what they saw as

systematic stasis.

What the final performance did provide was the opportunity to publicly inhabit roles of their choice. These roles were filtered for public consumption, but they were actively chosen roles. Anna and Eva spoke, without interruption, against the systems in their school they felt frustrated with. The girls introduced themselves with words they felt were important. The finale presented a unified, connected line of girls, demanding to be seen.

CONCLUSION: BEING HEARD, BEING SEEN

Throughout this process, I found evidence that the girls felt opportunities for speaking and for speaking out were limited in their day-to-day lives. They often commented on their lack of space for expressing their opinions, particularly those opinions that might be unpopular with parents, teachers, or adults in power. It was clear that the workshop space offered an uncensored platform that they did not feel they had elsewhere.

In many instances, the girls specifically expressed the lack of opportunity to voice their thoughts in school. When I spoke to Liz and Eva before the first performance, I asked what they hoped any teachers attending might take away from the show. Liz said, "I'm hoping teachers just take away that school is hard. And you've got to be able to express yourself. And I guess this was the way to do it."

"[I think they should] have more students be vocal about [issues and opinions]," Eva added, "because we had the opportunity [in STE] to be vocal about it, where we usually won't. And our voices would be shut down. But now we are not shut down, and we have the opportunity to allow people to hear."

Both Liz and Eva saw the workshop and performance as their opportunity to speak their minds, particularly about issues where they didn't feel heard otherwise. They viewed our space as a direct contrast to their space at school. Eva, before heading backstage as we prepared for the audience to enter the first night, told me how much she likes being honest without "getting into trouble." At school, "they don't want to hear it," she said.

"I like this program," Ashley said when I spoke to her and Maya after a workshop one day. "In school, I guess, like, we're given the opportunity to do different things, academic-wise, but we don't get a

chance to express ourselves as much as we want.” Ashley tended to be quiet during group discussions and a lot of her writing addressed the idea of living “in the background” or “in the shadows.” The workshops allowed for individual expression through a variety of mediums including writing and silent movement—opportunities to be ‘heard’ without necessarily speaking.

The girls talked about the process of creating this performance as a vehicle for their words, regardless of their interest in theatre or acting on its own. Some of the girls were required to participate in an approved summer program and STE was on the short list of acceptable opportunities. “They make us [participate],” Liz said, before our first performance. “So like, ‘I’m gonna use it to tell you.’” Liz, like many of the girls, appeared to have chosen the program not because she was particularly excited about drama, but because she was drawn to the offer of uncensored expression.

Much of what the girls had to say didn’t change dramatically from the first day to the last. However, they spent time more deeply examining their attitudes and opinions, questioning themselves and each other. Drama was a catalyst for critical thought. The nature of the work meant that when I asked probing questions or challenged their statements it wasn’t a confrontation. Instead, it was an attempt to better understand what they had to say. This was not an interview or a focus group; this was a room in which they were told from the beginning that their uncensored stories and questions were wanted. It’s clear to me that the process of devising created a space in which this group of girls felt they were able to openly and honestly talk about their opinions and ideas, free from constraints of what they might have imagined was expected of them.

And perhaps what was ‘empowering’ about the public performance was that the girls did circle back to platitudes, but after exploring those platitudes’ limitations. They presented themes of rising above, of self-belief, and of intrinsic worth that overshadows stereotypes and negative expectations. They chose the idealized clichés they wanted to be reality. What this may mean is that actively questioning bromides and narratives—even positive ones—might be useful in that this questioning provides an ownership that didn’t previously exist.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Dr. Gina L. Grandi teaches theatre and theatre education at Appalachian State University. Her doctoral research at New York University revolved around using theatre as qualitative theatre method—specifically using devising to explore issues of adolescent identity and cultural narratives. In her pre-university life, she was a full time public school teacher in San Francisco and a teaching artist and arts administrator in New York, working to bring theatre programs to underserved high schools. She is the co-founder and director of [The Bechdel Group](#), a theatre company dedicated to new plays in development by writers writing for women. In addition, Gina is a dramaturg and artistic associate with NYU's New Plays for Young Audiences series and on the editorial board of the peer reviewed journal *Voices in Urban Education*. She has a bachelor's degree from Vassar College, a master's and PhD from New York University, and an extensive finger puppet collection.