

## ***The Women's Project: A Director's Perspective on Creating a Performance Collage***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article details the process of mounting original works created by women, for the NYU Forum for Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice. Exploring notions of culture and identity, the material represented the female narrative in performance through autoethnographies, spoken word poetry, rants, monologues, and the use of shifting characterization and movement. The director and performers paid critical attention to the body as an instrument through which meaning is generated, representing the power of the solo voice in the context of the ensemble. The performers' artistic backgrounds, modes of solo performance, and the challenges and triumphs of re-envisioning and re-enacting social and cultural contexts are also discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Art is our connection to the universe, it is our connection to what came before, and to what will be and to what will never be.

(Anna Deavere Smith as quoted in Citron, p. 64).

At the NYU Forum for Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice, eight performance works on issues of culture and identity were woven together to present a dynamic theatrical collage created and embodied by fifteen women. My goal, as director and curator of the project, was to nurture and develop original writing, movement, poetic monologues, and reconstructed language in order to create a unique, insightful and compelling performance collage about the human condition. The majority of the works were solo performances framed in varying genres, and the final piece was a group work performed and devised by an ensemble of six women.

My background of directing and facilitating one person shows and original theatre works over the past twenty-five years also fed this process.

For many of the women, the decision to write and/or adapt their own material came from the desire to create new texts, and tell their own stories. They were also bent on investigating and researching their cultural backgrounds, and preparing the work as autoethnographic performance. Autoethnography has been defined as an autobiographical genre of writing about the personal and its relationship to culture, which, in turn, creates networks and reinforces community. However, in the words of ethnographer James Clifford:

Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages...culture is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, emergent. (Diamond, p. 6)

In postmodern times, cultural stories represent the intersection of subject and history, a literary practice that involves subjective knowledge, both linguistic and ideological. In the global perspective,

writing, reading, imagining and speculating are luxury activities that need to find voice and expression in emerging formats. According to writer, filmmaker, composer, and feminist and post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, for the woman writer:

...the time has passed when she can confidently identify herself with a profession or artistic vocation without question and relating to her color-woman condition.... Today, the growing ethnic-feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult for her to turn a blind eye to the specification of the writer as historical subject (who writes? and in what context?). (p. 6)

In the context of this project, the writers were students and performers who were given the opportunity to present the female narrative in performance, and to focus on untold stories, personal views and morphologies. Towards this purpose, autoethnographic performance is a method that works at the intersection of the intellectual and the bodily, blurring traditionally binary categorizations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, p. xxii). Merging text (autoethnographic narrative) and the body (the performative aspect), the act of performance allows researchers to “re-inhabit” their bodies as they build knowledge. As Elizabeth Grosz so eloquently describes: “Bodies are essential to accounts of power and critiques of knowledge” (1995, 32). One of my directorial intentions in *The Women’s Project* was to pay critical attention to the body as an instrument through which meaning is generated.

## CONTEXT

My inspiration for this format originally came from class performance projects that were created in a course called Images of Women in Theatre, taught in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU. The first production that emerged from this seed was a ninety-minute show entitled *Voices of Women*, which was performed as part of the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown Playhouse in the spring of 2003. The intention of this project, which I curated with my colleague Maya Ishiura, then producer of the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown, was to provide a creative forum for student work and performance research to continue beyond the classroom. Additionally, several of the pieces emerged from an assignment to create original work in my

Physical Theatre Improvisation class, which were then more fully developed after the end of the semester. By coaxing abstract concepts into the concrete realities of production, the endeavor was to better understand how original theatre is created.

Ishiura and I auditioned and assembled six performance works, involving nine women. Our goal was to encourage the authentic voice of the performer/storyteller using the themes of culture and identity. The works chosen included the story of one woman's journey in accepting her Jewish-Canadian identity; a textual and physical theatre piece about struggles with racism through the lens of being a Jamaican-American; a shadow theatre work reflecting the lives of three generations of women in a family in Taiwan; a tale with multiple characterizations about hair and identity in the African-American community; a silent mime performance exploring the struggle to succeed financially as a woman; and a devised physical theatre ensemble piece about a woman's metaphorical journey from birth to death. Due to the success of this production, *Voices of Women* was reinvented in the Black Box Theatre at NYU in 2004 as part of the Theatrix! Festival of Student Works. While it was a pared down version of the original production, some new women were represented, and a few from the first group returned. A new and improved format reflected cleaner transitions, as well as a deeper focus on the quality of the acting.

When the opportunity arose to create *The Women's Project* for the Ethnotheatre Forum in April 2006, I sent out an email notice for interested women to apply. Armed with a better sense of what would work in this structure, I was able to choose most of the works sight unseen. The works that I ultimately selected fell squarely into the category of representing notions of both culture and identity, in other words, pieces about psychological issues, romance, melodramas, realistic character dramas and monologues written by other authors were rejected.

The accepted selections were exciting; they revealed complex and intriguing writing styles, and captured verisimilitude and universality through their reflections on cultural experiences. According to Johnny Saldaña: "Playwrights have always been ethnodramatists, for what other source for a drama is there besides social life?" (4). *The Women's Project* encompassed several genres of performance material including monologues, spoken word poetry, rants and multiple character works (in

which the performer shifts quickly, portraying many different characters and personas). While most of the pieces were written from a personal perspective, there were several original interpretations and adaptations of poetry and fiction, and one devised ensemble piece that was performed with text and movement.

I met with the women one on one and helped them shape, edit or develop texts, which were in some cases quite extensive. Careful editing and pruning was essential, for in these short performance gems, each word, phrase and sentence needed to propel the action, illuminate the themes, and develop the characters. I created a collage for dramatic impact, merging the works into a working format complete with choreography, transitions and sound elements. The result was a combination of the participants' contributions of "meaningful life vignettes, significant insights and epiphanies" (Saldaña, 2005). As a director, I was able to have an overview of how the participants reacted to one another, transitioned, walked, gestured, and posed. All of the women sat in positions on the stage during the performance and listened, watched and supported each other's work. Instead of six long monologues in the format of "everyone takes a turn," I crafted vocal exchanges, calls and responses, and corporeal interactions in which the women physically drew one another into focus when one piece transitioned to another.

## **THE PERFORMERS/PARTICIPANTS**

In my role as director of the larger performance collage, placing the disparate works in a flowing order was challenging. The show opened with a work by a Guyanese woman, investigating her racial and religious identity after growing up in both England and the United States. She played a panoply of characters, as well as herself at different ages, switching adroitly back and forth. Crossing gender lines by portraying teenage boys and girls, her mother, her father, and several of her teachers, she aptly yet humorously represented a clash of cultures. The next performer related the story of her initial discovery of the depth of her faith in Judaism, and the inherent challenges and joys of this reality as she retraced memories of her initial awareness of spirituality as a young teenager.

Through a journey to Lebanon to learn more about her roots, a Lebanese-American performer told of encounters with her

grandparents, and vivid stories of travel, memory and language. She sang a Lebanese song and portrayed multiple characters from her past. In another multiple character work, the next performer created an original spoken word poem about her own diverse perspective of being a Latina, and the conflicts of her multidimensional identity. She reflected on how she was perceived differently by various peer groups, her parents and a variety of authority figures in her life, popping in and out of roles with intense physicality. The rhythms of her language and her use of varying accents illuminated the dynamic multicultural landscape of New York City.

There were several interpretations of existing texts. One was an excerpt of writing from Anais Nin's "A Woman Speaks," about women taking charge of their independence. The performer's voice, reflecting Nin's words as her own personal philosophy, gave a collective overshadowing to the whole project: "I am the master of my destiny...you can create your own freedom and you don't have to ask for it..." By embodying Nin's prose, she was able to represent her own social vision about the importance of change, liberation and independence as a woman. The next performer was a writer who had obtained permission from the author to create an original dramatic adaptation of *Clothes* (a short story by Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni) in which a young Indian woman plunges headfirst into an arranged marriage. Her story moves from India, where the young woman meets her prospective husband, to the intimacy of their wedding night; and then goes on to tell of their move to the United States and her subsequent confusion and frustration in the experience of the merging of two cultures.

The audience then experienced comedic impact with a fast paced "pregnancy rant," a raucous and humorous slice of life in an African-American neighborhood about getting tattooed, buying and taking a pregnancy test, and the repercussions therein. The performer utilized the rest of the cast as respondents who interjected questions throughout her fast paced rant such as: "What?!...Where?...Were you pregnant or not?" This interchange tied the entire group of performers together vocally, thus the project transitioned smoothly into the final multimedia piece about mothers and daughters, performed by a diverse ensemble of six women. Through text and movement, they embodied various characterizations and abstractions, enhanced by music and a slideshow

of photographs of the women and their mothers at various stages of their lives. This work was originally conceived by one ensemble member who assembled the group, devised the piece in collaboration with them, and then stood outside to direct it.

Devised theatre is different for every group, employing a variety of processes and methods of working. In the aforementioned piece, great emphasis was placed on an eclectic process requiring innovation, invention, imagination, risk, and above all, an overall group commitment to developing the work. While the director had conceived of the theme, and gathered information dramaturgically, the other ensemble members were extremely invested in sharing their own perspectives and shaping the complex choreography. The women brought in literature from their own research and cultural backgrounds, and participated in the creation of the final product by assembling, editing and re-shaping each individual's contradictory experiences with motherhood or being mothered. As the overall director of the Project, I made textual suggestions during the process, and came in at the end to give feedback on the movement sequencing, transitions, and structure.

## FORMS

*The Women's Project* was unique in that a variety of performance modes were represented. Solo performance, in existence throughout theatre history, has more recently been defined and differentiated as the solo play, the one woman/man show, the character sketch, the memory monodrama (past emotions and events), and the diary monodrama, (the relating of personal experiences or private tales of mournful misfortune) (Catron, p. 42-43). There is additionally autoethnographic prose narrative, told from the central protagonist's perspective, which can also be replayed as a scripted adaptation in the form of a one-person ethnodrama, if the original story suggests playable stage action for a performer (Saldaña, p. 20).

Contemporary solo artists have often been shuffled into the categories of the standup, the storyteller, or the performance artist, the latter of which greatly muddies the waters when attempting to clarify the solo genre. It is a well-known fact that solo performance can be overly didactic or political, confessional, solipsistic, or self-congratulatory. Conversely, the form can represent informative autobiographical insights, therefore benefiting the artist through opportunities to realize

aesthetic and social visions, to voice sociopolitical commentary, and to exorcise personal demons through personal catharsis (Saldaña, p. 34). The autoethnographic solo performance using multiple character transitions can be episodic and complex, as well as frame ambivalent realities.

Ethnotheatre employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or interpretations of data. Investigating a particular facet of the human condition, it is necessary to create a solid performance framework regardless of how the idea for a drama was first inspired. Theorist Tami Spry writes:

For me, performing autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally.... It has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon my self as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate and embrace. (186)

For Spry, the dynamic and dialectical relation of the text and body emerge as a major theme in her autoethnographic praxis. In the fieldwork, writing, and performing of autoethnography, text and body are redefined, and their boundaries blur dialectically (2003). Dwight Conquergood articulates the term "dialogical performance," wherein the process of performance the performer engages the text of another – oral, written by self or other, dialogically, meaning the performer approaches the text with a commitment to be challenged, changed, embraced and interrogated (1985). Indeed, through the representation of movement and language, postcolonial and postmodern writing has exposed and politicized the presence of the body.

Dialogical performance is an ethical performance approach that aims to bring together different voices, worldviews, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another (Conquergood, 1985). In embodying the text fictionalized by Divakaruni, the performer "maintained close allegiance to the lived experience...real people...presenting (her) stories through an artistic medium" (Saldaña, p. 3). Her intention was to investigate cultural mores in India, thereby embodying the playtext of a fictionalized account of an Indian woman,



through her own lens as an Indian woman. Her performance was thus a story within a story, or a play within a play. The Lebanese-American performer brought memories of the past to life in describing her return to Lebanon, and embodying and conveying the words of her grandparents. In her autoethnographic account, her nostalgia for her roots clashed with her own desire to be an independent Lebanese-American woman, and her own social vision informed her emerging cultural identity.

The “pregnancy rant” was culled from a larger autobiographical playtext, which has roles for three women performers representing different sides or identities of one woman. By isolating the rant or “slice of life” as a shortened autoethnotheatrical work, the performer/writer told of becoming overwhelmed by fear of the pressures of pregnancy. In this case, her personal narrative performance gave shape to social interpretation, a story of the body and through the body, which made a cultural conflict concrete (Langellier, 1999). Acting as herself with heightened theatricality, the performer created a parody of an extremely humorous, fast-talking, tough city woman. Saldaña, who was in the audience, referred to many of the works in *The Women’s Project* as “stand-up” material. He has emphasized:

Theatre’s primary goal is neither to educate nor to enlighten. Theatre’s primary goal is to entertain – to entertain ideas as it entertains its spectators. With ethnographic performance, then, comes the responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative. (14)

Humor can help to illuminate performance work, but stand-up comedy is often perceived as superficial fare. Alison Oddey defines the stand-up comic in a positive light as “being funny, owning her own identity through the words she has written and speaks” (1999, p. 3). In response to “stand up” being a traditionally male genre, she goes on to emphasize that performing stand-up is an empowering experience, allowing the performer to dominate and to control an audience, “...challenging a stereotypical role and the patriarchal tradition by making a woman the speaking subject” (1999, p. 290). In the context of *The Women’s Project*, several women who had written their own material performed it from a personally humorous perspective, and in doing so transformed the

autobiographical process itself into a public event. While I would not categorize these performances as “stand-up,” their comedic sensitivity to the realities of daily life lent itself to the action of the project as a whole. They represented the polyphonic voice/body processes of cultural identity as playful, mobile, and dynamic, blurring the boundaries of reality and imagination.

Ethnographer Jim Mienczakowski (2006) emphasizes the use of *vraisemblance* in ethnodrama, the creation of plausible accounts of the everyday world, in order to represent perceived social realities. He goes on to describe performance ethnographers who made use of parody (M.J. Mulkay, 1985) and irony (Laurel Richardson, 1991) as a form of social analysis and a deliberate ploy to instigate perceptual shifts in the response of the audience. In the performances in *The Women's Project*, reality was always a social construction, interpreting culture through self-reflection, including the representation of memory as well as human action. Indeed, the “standup mode” of performance traditionally signifies strength, standing alone on the stage. In this format, the women could have it both ways, presenting a powerful solo voice, but also being surrounded by an ensemble of other voices.

If one is playing oneself, in an autobiographical mode, as was the case for many of the women in this project, the façade of characterization is removed, and the performer is seen without that protective mask, resulting in fundamental honesty. As Saldaña puts it, theatre is one of the artistic media through which fictionalized and nonfictionalized social life – the human condition – can be portrayed symbolically and aesthetically for spectator engagement and reflection (10). Within the play frame a performer is not herself (because of the operations of illusion), but she is also not not herself (because of the operations of reality). Performer and audience alike operate in a world of double consciousness (Saldaña, Spry, Mienczakowski). For me, as director and curator, the goal of working with many different modes of performance in a collage format was to offer the participants a release from traditional structures and expectations about writing and directing and plunge into an exploratory, intimate and playful mode of discovery.

## **PROCESS**

My intention was to create a comprehensive collage that was complex,

multi-layered, multi-vocal and multi-visioned, resisting the imposition of any single perspective, answer or truth (Heddon, p. 218). I did not seek, as director, to place myself at the top of a hierarchical structure, but rather to remain at the center of the rehearsal fulcrum, ensuring that everyone was working together. Some women were performing their own work for the first time, and others came to me with partially developed and fragmented scripts, at times incredibly lengthy and unmanageable for this particular format. I worked with them to edit and mold the work. As Saldaña puts it: "...always remember: playwriting is both a craft and an art...the ultimate sin of theatre is to bore, and only a self-indulgent playwright refuses to edit lengthy text from initial and post-performance drafts" (p. 27). Most of the women were trained as actors or performers, which indeed informed their creative process. Many complied with performer Meera Syal's statement: "It makes you a better actor to write, because you know from an actor's point of view what is a good line and what isn't" (Oddey, 1999, p.155). We set about working with clear and heightened physicality, so that in many cases, a kind of highly personalized and theatricalized storytelling took place.

Those women in the group who were specifically exploring their cultural backgrounds delved into their own extensive research, which they then translated into performance texts for the stage. Conquergood observes of performative ethnographic research: "Ethnography is an embodied practice...; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing...(it) privileges the body as a site of knowing..." (Hesse-Biber & Leavy p. 180) Thus it was essential to represent the women's stories in a clearly articulated choreographic format, balancing the disparate nature of the works, as time shifts occurred spontaneously without the encumbrance of sets or props.

I also sought to achieve depth of characterization, understand tempo, and guide vocal dynamics. Vocal variation was key— rate, pitch, volume and timbre – to overcome the danger of a single voice becoming a mere drone of sound, even in the context of many other voices. In many cases, language was a direct reflection of character, as the performer morphed into different characters, utilizing many accents. Indeed, the importance of accent was heightened, as many of these works were dramas of language, using imagery and poetic diction to enlarge the theatrical effect. In an intensely productive working environment, our one on one rehearsals allowed a comfortable give and take between actor and director with the possibility to develop

wonderfully layered and detailed work. We were able to experiment with new approaches or techniques, such as adding gestures, abstraction, stillness, movements, and hone rhythm and pacing of lines.

## **CONCLUSION**

I believe the potential for expression is limitless, following the rhythms and dimensions of the performance locale, and the inspiring contributions of the performers. I echo the words of director Andrea Hairston: "What I am straining and aching after is a language for the almost unspeakable (in tongues I know) almost unfathomable, and certain contradictory diversity that is my experience of the world" (Donkin & Clement, p. 236). With the desire and intention to maintain aesthetic control of their material, the performers sought to discover and share the authority of their research, memories and experiences. In order to meet the great challenge of re-envisioning and recreating social contexts and worlds, they drew forth, "a way of understanding the intersections of self, other and context passionately and reflexively" (Spry, p. 717). The act of women speaking their own stories radically challenges traditional notions of spectacle and spectatorship, as female performers move their voices and bodies from the background to the foreground.

Admittedly, the investigation of this process needs further analysis, incorporating the voices of the performers about their own experiences in researching and creating material. This should be achieved through a series of interviews seeking details about aesthetic goals as well as cultural identity. It is my hope as well that these performative representations of the complex, diverse and ambiguous lives of real women will go on to find other venues of expression, thus growing and expanding into newly devised frameworks.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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