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# Theatre Makers and Social Issues: How Art Imitates Life

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Theatre Makers and Social Issues:

How Art Imitates Life

Marlena McHenry

Honors Senior Project

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The most stimulating experience of my theatre career to date has been the failed devised piece, *The Wake Project*, which our company of twelve worked on from May to March. Failed means we did not put up a show that we one hundred percent created. Throughout the process, we attempted to challenge our white privilege, as a predominately white group, but ultimately reinforced it in many problematic ways. I learned more about myself as a theatre maker, but more importantly learned to see my own level of racial literacy and socialization. Devising was a form of theatre I was intimidated to confront, and it helped me to discover more about myself as an artist and a human.

Before I can talk about the content and problems of our process, I must explain the form of devising itself. When I say devising, the definition I have found most helpful is “the endeavor to collectively create original and specific performances that could never exist without the participation of the particular people involved in a certain period of time” (Lipkin 255). Every group will inherently create different work given the same “hunch,” or beginning idea. The absence of even one person can completely change the group dynamic. Therefore, making this process a class during fall quarter created a space where we knew we would all be together for certain periods of time. Our company was led by Rich Brown, a professor of psychophysical acting, Suzuki, Viewpoints, commedia, and devising.

Devising with Rich has five phases: research, creation, development, rehearsal, and performance. Research is by far my least favorite phase, but in this process it was very important. Because this piece was about current events as well as systems of oppression and institutionalized racism formed long ago but still in place, research was crucial. The research phase also includes creating company credos, exploring group source material, making research presentations, stating the piece’s intention, and identifying the target audience. Intention is a

simple statement. Ours was “to confront the loss of humanity”. Audience is who you are making this piece for, thereby creating something specific that will tap into universality. Our audience was “the unconscious white millennial”. We worded these much later in the process, however, during the creation or development phase because we were unsure of how to proceed with the material at first.

Phase two is by far my favorite phase and why I auditioned for this project. In devising we discuss, compare, and create form and content. Forms can be filled with different content. Examples of a form would be turning on a green light on an empty block, walking across the stage at a tempo of a 4, or an elaborately choreographed dance. Examples of content are monologues, scenes, a political speech, or other writings. In the creation phase any and all ideas are tried. I am a form creator at heart and it comes to me more easily than content. Through this process I found that I can create content and I removed that block from myself, but it took a month or two. But naturally, I see in form. I also find strength in pairing existing form and content, or layering and sequencing moments together. A moment is simply form plus content. Phase two ends with a work in progress showing, which took place during dead week of fall quarter for a small, invited audience.

Phases three and four have different objectives but can overlap significantly. Development includes refining or completely redoing the work in progress showing. The group evaluates what worked, what fulfilled the intention, and what did not. It can include a writer’s retreat for those in the company who want to actually write the show. We had a writer’s retreat that lasted for about three hours over winter break for reasons I will explain later. Some devising companies also collectively cast their shows, which we did for the work in progress showing. Usually this phase ends with a read-through of the final script. However, the rehearsal phase

usually begins before the script is finished and the details are solidified. This is when the devising process becomes like that of a traditional show. Cuts are made, there are regular nightly rehearsals, and there is a deadline because of performances.

The audience is fifty percent of a show as we often say, and in devising they are the final collaborator. Many devised shows go back into creation, development, and rehearsal after their first round of performances if they want to revise the show based on audience feedback. Performance is for the audience. Theatre has the power to affect others, and the intent of many devised pieces is to reveal a new way of thinking, an injustice, or a passion. Devising is becoming more popular now because we as a human community need new shows that speak to our problems in an artistic way. Doing any theatrical process changes me as a person, but seeing that change in others is much more rewarding. Personally, my mantra is “theatre changes people ten percent”. It can flip a switch that makes them want to research and learn more. We as artists cannot tell others how to think, but we can propose questions.

Our process began in May of 2016. Auditions consisted of you bringing in a two-minute piece of anything the initial hunch inspired. At the time, the show was called “Trigger Warning: Trigger Warning.” The idea was act one taking place on WWU’s campus in the 1930s when President Charles Fisher was accused of communism, and act two was at a fictional university in 2017 where trigger warnings had reached an all-time high. The hunch was not why I auditioned. Devising had always been a process that scared me, so I needed to challenge myself and do it. Our callback was four hours on a Saturday consisting of interviews, creating mini-compositions, and sharing special talents, or acts of virtuosity, we had that could contribute to the production. I was cast as a member of the creation company, and began to research over the summer with the group.

In August, we received an email from Rich saying that he wanted to change the topic of the show. I was fairly indifferent because I was interested in the form of devising not the content. However, he proposed that we focus on the extra-judicial police shootings of black men and women in the United States. At the time our company had only two students of color, and only one was African American. This would remain the same until about November, which I now see as a large problem when trying to tackle this issue.

Before class began and at our first meeting, the company expressed concerns about this change in topic and devising in general. Everyone felt overwhelmed by the intersectionality of social and cultural issues this topic encompassed. What were we going to focus on? Could we focus on one thing without excluding others? Are we, as a group that is majority white even allowed to try and make a piece about this? We wanted to be able to speak for and not with, and now I see that doing so should have included inviting or finding more people of color to join our company. That was the first step that was missing from the process. Other members of the company advocated for this, but others, like me, were hesitant. I was latching on more to the idea of showing our unique group's point of view. If we could show how this affected our lives, maybe it would spark change in other whites on campus and in the community. This was not ill-intentioned of me, but it was motivated by internalized white racial superiority, privilege, and socialization that I was not aware of at the time (DiAngelo 52, 56). We argued that it would be a waste of our privilege not to talk about this. That is true, but trying to talk about it without other voices of color is, I think, the main reason our show did not come to fruition. However, art has to have a point of view. We knew we could not fix anything, but could tell the simple, human story. We could ask the audience to hear it instead of changing the television channel. The art we were

making had a strong motivation and want to help and spark change, but in order for it to have the impact we wanted, we should have invited more students of color to make it with us.

We did try to create opportunities to find students who would want to join our company. We led two “listening sessions” on campus to hopefully create safe spaces to discuss race on campus. Company members invited friends, and we visited clubs on campus. Eventually, two new students joined our company and participated based on their availability. This just came too late in the process and on too small of a scale. If we had begun the listening sessions right when the quarter began, or held an additional audition, the outcome may have been different. I know a personal fear of mine and of others was that because the other students of color in our department did not want to devise or were involved in other projects, we did not know the skillsets we would be recruiting. Devising and theatre can of course be taught, but because of the limited amount of time in our process, this seemed daunting.

So we continued on, learning about the devising process and collaborative art. We read “The Performer’s Guide to the Collaborative Process” by Sheila Kerrigan, one of the most concise texts written on working together in the context of theatre. She details the steps of creating new work and couples them with how to structure a collaborative process in general as well as group dynamics and communication (Kerrigan). A few of her techniques and structures are worth mentioning. She details five archetypal roles we play, found by therapist Virginia Satir, when we are under stress. The *placater* apologizes and pleases, whereas the *blamer* finds fault in others and uses shame as a tactic. The *computer* is impersonal, organizes, and listens to evaluate. The *distracter* diverts attention and changes the subject, and the *leveler* is honest, soft, and flowing (Kerrigan 111). None of these archetypes are good or bad, and a group can use each of them to its advantage. Throughout this process, I found that I am usually a combination of a

computer and a distractor. This allows me to diffuse tension, process, and edit, but also stay silent, think too long, and sidetrack.

Kerrigan also explains Liz Lerman's critical response process in order to respond to form, content, moments, or new works in an objective way (Kerrigan 142). It has four steps, and I have used it in devising but also in scene work, audition preparation, playwriting, directing, and while making compositions. Step one is "gut hits": what worked, what did you remember, what affected you? Step two allows the performer(s) to ask the audience non-prescriptive questions in order to help with the revision process. Examples could be explain the relationship between characters X and Y, how did a change in location affect you, or what did a light represent? The aim is to avoid questions with yes/no answers or that lead the audience to a certain answer. In step three, the audience asks the artists rhetorical questions about things they did not understand in the same way as step two. For example, why did character X move downstage, or what was the intention behind this light? Step four allows the audience to give artistic opinions, solutions, or ideas. However, the artists must agree to hear these suggestions. To facilitate this, the common structure is the audience member says "I have an artistic idea about X, would you like to hear it?" The artists can then accept or decline the offer if it will block them in their process (Kerrigan 142-143). I have found that this process lets me know what is working or not working in the piece, and points out why that is. Kerrigan also highlights the importance of using "I feel" statements in any stage of collaborative work. These allow for peaceful communication that focuses on your own needs rather than blaming others (Kerrigan 147).

As the process continued, so did our research. We invited professor Vernon Johnson to visit a class, read "Between the World and Me," and did research projects on redlining, the education system, jails, shootings, trials, and United States history. The research phase lasted a



few weeks, and we were continually posting articles and videos in our Facebook group, as well as watching documentaries during our weekly potlucks. It continued into the creation phase as we began to work on forms and show them in class.

Almost every night, we would meet with new groups to create forms together. The class was two days a week, and each group would present the assigned number of forms each time. This required us to be violent art-makers, as Anne Bogart articulates, and make decisions (Bogart 45). Then we transitioned into making content on top of forms, so we were all writing monologues or dialogue. I am much more comfortable making form than content, but I found that because of the research phase, I could look back at my notes or find new sources that inspired writings. It revealed to me that being passionate about a subject allows you to create. Devising is about learning tools in order to create material, but the care and desire needs to be present to make art. The difference is, that appetite gets to be channeled into creating form and content in full, instead of beginning with a script and prescribed vision. As Brown describes in an article, this is the difference between vertical and horizontal theatre. Vertical begins with text and the other elements like set, lights, sound, and blocking are stacked on top of it. However, horizontal theatre gives text the same weight as all of the other elements of theatre (Brown 53-54). This new design requires a new way of making theatre to accommodate it, which is devising.

Once we spent time with form and content, we began to combine them and create moments. We wrote out all the forms and content we decided to name, meaning we wanted to keep them and give them an easy-to-remember title. Then we tried out combinations, or took a piece of content and made a new form to put it in, etc. Some of the moments we made this way even made it into our work-in-progress showing. However, some moments we created were not

from pre-existing ideas at all. Rich always recommended we keep a journal next to our bed and with us at all times in case we had ideas. He called devising “an invitation to obsession”. I found this to be true around November especially. Two ideas I had were made into fully realized moments, and they are still some of the moments of theatre that I am most proud of creating.

The first we called “Cop Dance,” and it was very form-heavy as I am like to do. I was listening to the musical *Hamilton* and the song “My Shot” came on. I had heard this song hundreds of times before and knew all the words, but this time in my car was different. I listened to it over and over and saw this picture in my head. It was a person in the middle slow-motion crawling to a standing position during parts of the song, and others dancing around them. Then scenes would intercut, there would be a gunshot at the end, and there was of course more detail. I knew what I had to do. I got together with my friends Alyssa and Bryce who were also in the company and explained the idea. I needed to get it out of my head and present it to the company. Alyssa is a choreographer, Bryce has incredible musical editing and producing skills, and I knew the form. We created it in about two hours on a Sunday and presented it the next class day as an extra assignment. I knew it was a powerful moment, and it affected the company as such. They wanted us to bring it back in with a song we created, so we did that. Bryce and another company member, Aiken, worked together to make a track using text samples from a documentary we had watched and music they created. We reworked the choreography, incorporated red and blue flashlights as light sources, and added more people to it. It became a part of the work in progress showing, and I still feel proud that the rest of the company saw value in this idea and wanted to add to it. It is definitely in the “good idea bin” for later use.

The second was called “Coffee with Sam;” it was my breakthrough for content creation. We had decided by early November that we wanted a main character who was an African

American female, Sam, who would not be seen during the show. The intention was to humanize a character that was unknown to the audience in order to make these shootings unable to be ignored. You are told to write what you know, so how could I write about a character like this? Going back to what I now see as our company's original problem, this could have been solved by changing the makeup of the company or collaborating with more students of color. However, that option still runs the risk of exploiting them for their stories. So, at the time, my thought was I would write from a perspective I knew. I wrote a longer monologue for the character of Sam's best friend that described their friendship and memories. To avoid my discomfort with our subject or reaching out, I wrote what I knew to make the piece more universal. It was a good moment in itself that did not necessarily need to be in this show. It could have been a monologue about anyone's best friend. The group I was working with had the idea to set it in a warmly lit living room while making French press. We used other elements of theatre like smell and light along with text to engage all the senses of our audience. I wrote that content, but allowing others to come up with the form made it meaningful and collaborative. When creating these and other moments, one idea creates an environment where failure is the goal. By trying everything, something better is made from all of the other attempts. Devising celebrates failure because it always leads to success in some form.

After creating moments like these, we needed to create version one of our structure for our work-in-progress showing. To do this, Rich's effective and highly "technical" process involved sticky notes. We wrote every moment on a post-it and began arranging them in order to create story, arc, and juxtaposition. This was constantly in-flux until the performance, and we often combined moments or forms to streamline ideas. The months of preparation for the showing seemed worth it. We had a story and structure, and I felt proud of the level of

theatricality and form we had created together. The content was still questionable, but for me at the time, the focus was on form and making an effective piece of theatre, which I believe we had. It elicited emotional responses and opinions, which is what I think theatre should accomplish. The new theatre we as a community need now should provoke thought, disagreement, and change. This is what we were striving to do, but went about in the wrong way.

Overwhelmingly, the feedback we received from the showing was good form, bad content. I expected this. We had a group that could create content, but did not have the shared experience or diversity to make the content necessary for the piece. We tried to tell a story we felt we were allowed to tell, but some felt that was not a story that needed to be heard. Because of our company's make-up, most of the characters in the story were white, and it focused on their relationship to a student of color. Therefore, the story was being told from their perspective as the majority of stories today in media are. We did this in an effort to write what we knew and not "speak for", but in doing so, we missed the "speaking with" part. The original issue of diversity and representation which we had attempted to work around could not be ignored.

I and many of the other company members did not come to this conclusion on our own. I can now identify that we did not because of white fragility, internalized racial superiority, socialization, and other factors having to do with our society's institutionalized racism. We had all made some steps in the direction of racial literacy because of our research, but we were still missing it in practice and action. There is no such thing as passive antiracism, and it has to be a daily struggle to work against one's socialization and comfortability (DiAngelo 291). The unnecessarily heavy load of stress on the students of color in our group resulted in them voicing these problems to us, which we should have been more aware and preventative of. Their anger was completely justified, and it caused some of them to leave the project.

Over winter break, we discussed what to do. Where was the line between something being a trigger warning and a harmful, shared cultural experience that we were not allowed to talk about? Art should cause disagreement and discussion, but not intentional and preventable pain. So we decided we needed to take steps back, like we should have when the topic changed. Looking back now, I see this process as an important step in my racial literacy journey. I would not have been able to move forward without making mistakes like these. Now, I can identify them and try each day to prevent them from happening again. Real failure leaves room for real learning to occur. It would have been an extreme use of our privilege to then walk away from the project and not put up a show at all.

Therefore, our theatre could no longer be that of a regular narrative structure. With the limited time left from January to the first week of March, we did not have the time to create a whole new show from scratch. It was decided that we would all bring back proposals of what to do to our first meeting in January. The performance nights could all be one show, or each day could be a new work, exhibition, protest, etc. I got together with two other company members over break and we collaborated on a few proposals. We had the idea of making podcasts or video logs of students or community members of color asking them a story about their experience at Western, in Bellingham, or whatever they were comfortable sharing. This idea was accepted by the company, but we did not get any responses through our group email account. Another failed project, but I take away that in order to share stories like the ones we had heard before, they needed to come from a place of genuine interest and friendship instead of just for the sake of art-making. We wanted to share more voices of color, but we found other ways to do so.

By this time we were calling the piece *The Wake Project: Listening to Voices of Color*. There were several proposals that we combined and made it into the final performance week. We

received several responses to our invitation to submit art in order to make a gallery showcasing local artists of color. We ended up creating a gallery space outside of the theatre to show these artist's works along with artist statements. We took all pieces that were submitted in an effort to facilitate and not edit their voices. We also hired a local Seattle band made up of students of color to perform after our Saturday show as a fun closing-night activity. The theatrical part of the event took longer to organize, but it ended up being a three-part show. Jay Chavez, a student of color in theatre department wanted to create a one-man piece about being a person of color, a drag queen, and his family life. We also contacted an already-existing show, "First Person: Diverse Student Stories," and one of their actors performed his monologue in *The Wake Project* as well. The third part was a show called *Black Flag* written by Idris Goodwin, an African American playwright. We saw this show as doable because the cast was an African American woman, a Korean American man, and a white woman. The premise was a white roommate hangs a confederate flag in an NYU dorm room she shares with her black roommate. It was also only a one-act, so we could rehearse it over a short period of time. Within the department, Rich invited two students of color with those identities to be a part of the production, and they accepted. Then he cast me as the other woman in the show.

It was an odd experience being the only member of the creation company actually performing in the show. I knew no one was upset about this, because the casting made sense. The other white women in the company had expressed interest in other jobs for the show, and I fit the profile of the character the best. I felt awkward, but I knew that this was the best use of my talents in the show. Acting was my major, and I had originally auditioned to create a show and perform in it. Now that was not as important of an ingredient, but it gave me more drive and purpose in the project that I no longer felt as invested in. I now had a deeper understanding of the

societal issues we were addressing, but as an artist, I felt like I was not getting anything out of the project any longer. This gave me a chance to work on my craft while continuing to educate myself and perform in a show that was uncomfortable and would raise questions for our target audience.

My character, Sydney, was a typical Georgia girl who loved her family and her heritage which she assumed she knew so much about. Deja, her roommate, was from Detroit. The first day they move in, Sydney hangs a confederate flag and claims it reminds her of home and her mother. Deja decides it is not worth it to continue to argue over this, and Sydney unknowingly uses her white privilege as a tool. Later in the show, Deja brings Harry back to her dorm during a party, and they discuss the flag and its implications. This begins the discussion about racism towards all people of color. Sydney then enters, also drunk, and a fight about the flag ensues. The final scene is after winter break, and Sydney explains to Deja how sorry she is and how she wants to take the flag down. She saw how people in her hometown act and how institutionalized racism is always in play. Deja is happy Sydney is making this first step, but will not take the flag down for Sydney when asked. She says Sydney must take it down because she should want to remove it and work against it. The last image we are left with is Sydney looking at the flag.

It was interesting to play a character like Sydney after the events of the past months. I could identify in the script where her white privilege was speaking and why her comments and reasoning were problematic. In rehearsal, we also had discussions about the text and personal experiences as a cast. Talking to peers and audience members after the shows, I knew that the pieces had collectively affected or at least influenced our target audience in some way. The plays, monologues, and art all were about trying to expose people to the work of artists of color and their stories. We helped with that in some small way, but we could have done much better.

After strike, which the whole company did not even attend, we never met up again to discuss the process. We had lost trust in each other as a group, and no one seemed to want to talk about it anymore. Even now we have not reconnected as a whole group, and my close friends and I who were also in the creation company avoid the subject most of the time. I have only begun talking about it again in my Honors seminar, “What’s Up with White America?” Professor Johnson encourages us to give examples of our own privilege and ways we perpetuate systems of oppression, and this is the perfect long-form example for me. I did not have the vocabulary to describe patterns of racism during the devising process. I did not have the knowledge of socialization, white fragility, and antiracist practices. I did not logically know that the country we live in was built upon racism and enforces it through systems every day. Now I have the beginning tools to implement antiracist practices in my life, but I have not yet taken large steps towards them such as attending community meetings or conferences (DiAngelo 298-299). I have begun to “see racial discomfort as a positive sign,” especially while writing this paper (DiAngelo 299). I feel as though I have not taken larger steps at this moment because I am moving to Georgia in two months for graduate school. The goal will be to begin more rooted and sustainable antiracist practices there where I can be a part of a community.

As an artist, this process was ultimately disappointing. Devising was an intimidating and frightening process to me, so I decided to force myself to audition. I learned so much in the creation of our failures, but it was still disappointing to not create a new work. Even more saddening was the fact that we as a predominately white company caused the members of color of our group to feel uncomfortable, unsafe, and need to leave the project. That tells me that our society is far from where we think we are at this moment. There are many things we should have done, but we hopefully learned from our mistakes so we can continue to become racially literate.



After this year, I can now see racism at work in our society each day, and I should be doing something about it. Devising gave me the tools to create form and content more efficiently and effectively. It also gave me more tools in order to become more human as all theatre does. As artists we cannot champion one cause or be passive as I have been most of my life. Being an artist means taking action for something you believe in. If I want to be an artist, I must educate myself, and strive to help others want to do that as well. I think art changes people ten percent, but to do so, I must change more than that in order to make pieces that inspire others.

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