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Devising as Drama Therapy: An Experiment

HNRS 490 & THTR 496 Senior Capstone Project

Western Washington University

Spring 2021

Introduction

In the fall of 2020 I enrolled in Kathleen Young's class "Cross-Cultural Trauma and Recovery," a senior capstone class offered through the anthropology department. The subject matter was incredibly interesting to me, and I found myself making connections between the material in class and material I'd learned in my theatre classes; how moving the body releases tension, the effect contact and communication have on cognitive processing, and the benefits of being a part of a community of like-minded peers. I focused my research paper for the class on drama therapy and its uses for war veterans and others with war-related post-traumatic stress disorder, and was surprised by how much research material I was able to uncover. I included case studies and examples from all over the globe, from a psychological study done in Canada to a production of *Hair* done in Sarajevo during the height of the Serbian conflict. As I was writing my paper, I started to realize that the ways drama therapy was being used for these survivors of PTSD perfectly aligned with devised theatre.

Devised theatre is collaboratively-created and begins without a script to produce an original work. Every devising company has its own personal method for accomplishing this, but it is common for companies to begin with a source material or idea that interests the group, and together they build an entire performance that emphasizes physical movement and body language. I found that survivors of war-related trauma can benefit from devised theatre because of the highly physical nature of the form, the empowerment that comes from engaging in the creative process, and the connections that are built within the community. These findings were fascinating to me, as someone who is deeply interested in how my art can cause lasting positive change for both the creators and the audience.

I began to wonder if devised theatre would be particularly effective in helping people work through other types of trauma, particularly trauma that affects an entire community. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to test my hypothesis in the way that artists conduct experiments: by doing it myself. I gathered five other Western Washington University theatre students and set about creating a devised piece together that explored our shared pandemic trauma. This is not an experiment in the scientific sense that it is replicable or has hard, quantitative data, but relies on qualitative data I collected from our discussions as a group and with interviews I conducted with group members afterwards. Together, the six of us created a collection of devised moments and personal narratives that I compiled into a 32 minute video titled: “Making Theatre in a Pandemic: An Experiment in Devising”.

The Process

For eight weeks our group met at Forest and Cedar Park in Bellingham, a large expanse of green lawn tucked right underneath Western’s campus. We often met twice a week, occasionally three times, and worked in two hour sessions together. Our first week of rehearsals was devoted to tablework and discussion about our initial ideas for the project, our expectations, and setting group practices for everyone’s comfortability. For many of us, this was our first in-person project since the pandemic had forced everyone into lockdown in March of 2020, so it was a valuable learning experience as an aspiring director to learn how to create a safe environment for an ensemble that had spent an extended amount of time in isolation and had some anxieties about working together in-person again. Together, we agreed on a common set of guidelines and rules we could all agree on. Some of the rehearsal measures we came up with included:

- Rehearsal location had to be an outdoor space
- Face masks worn at all times
- Check-in of physical boundaries at the beginning of each rehearsal

Because of the easy access to COVID-19 testing on Western's campus, we felt comfortable engaging in physical skin-to-skin contact during our rehearsals, as long as all other measures were being followed. By the time we were halfway through the process, all six of us had received our second dose of the vaccine, and that also helped in allowing us to remain comfortable working close together.

Another topic we discussed in the first week of rehearsals was the prioritization of everyone's mental health during this project. Many of us had shared feelings of burnout from having to go to school during a global pandemic, as well as experiencing difficulty in balancing as many projects as we were used to before the pandemic. Since the aim of this project was to foster therapy and rehabilitation, it made sense to me to create an environment where the other participants could participate in the process without feeling burdened or obligated to show up and work if it would negatively affect their mental health. For these reasons, none of our rehearsals were mandatory; people could come and go as they needed in the two-hour rehearsal window, and no one was expected to explain their absence if they decided not to attend.

We also found that we collectively had experienced an unhealthy pressure to create during the pandemic, and often placed extreme amounts of unnecessary stress by placing high expectations for ourselves and our artistic work. This especially concerned me, because our rehearsal time frame was already quite short for putting an entire devised piece on its feet, and the time crunch might create a pressure similar to this in our project. To combat this, we decided not to force ourselves to come up with a finished product by the end of the rehearsal process. The

idea was to generate material in our rehearsals that could be used in a devised piece, but we would only put the piece together if it felt like a natural progression of our rehearsals, and we wouldn't try to fight the short amount of time we had to rehearse and create. Even if we hadn't developed anything solid, I still could have recorded our last rehearsal together and used that for my result of the final project.

These two decisions to prioritize mental and emotional health over a traditional rehearsal setting and a polished, final product created a unique experience for me unlike any theatrical production I've been a part of. While I understand that it would be nearly impossible to operate this way in a professional theater, I found so much value in implementing these practices. When ensemble members showed up to rehearsal, I knew they were ready and excited to work together, and that they wanted to be there. Although you might expect there to be low attendance at rehearsal, there was never a session where we had less than four people present, which is two thirds of the group! This was a significant indicator to me that the process was enjoyable enough for the five ensemble members to take the time to attend, and this felt like a small step towards creating a project that was truly therapeutic.

In the second week we began working on our feet, utilizing the viewpoint method of working. Viewpoints, or viewpointing, is an exercise created by choreographer and dancer Mary Overlie, and expanded on by theatre director Anne Bogart (Overlie 2016)(Bogart and Landau 2004). In short, it articulates and specifies qualities of movement, and breaks down elements of space and time for actors to consider and react to as they move about the space. Viewpoints are often used by devising companies, because they are a great way for companies to develop natural physical material together, rather than having a director block, or choreograph, what is

happening on stage. The nonverbal nature of viewpoints also lends itself to creating the physicality of devised theatre pieces.

We would begin our rehearsals with a group check-in; an exercise called “Rose, thorn bud”. Everyone in the group takes turns sharing one “rose” (good thing about their day), one “thorn” (bad thing about their day), and one “bud” (something they’re looking forward to). The check-in helps to bring everyone’s focus and attention towards each other, and for the group to get social talk and dwelling thoughts about civilian life out of the way at the start of the rehearsal. After this, we’d share our physical boundaries for the day. This was just to let each other know if any of us were uncomfortable with being physically touched that day, a practice I’ve learned from studying consent-based theatre practices for directors (Pace 2020).

Next, we’d share stories about our pandemic experience. Since many devised pieces use source material for inspiration, I thought the stories we share with each other could serve as our source material for the piece. The stories didn’t have any requirement except that they be a personal experience that occurred during the pandemic. I was surprised by how many experiences we held in common! One thing we all ended up discussing was our “pandemic birthdays,” the events of the day that was our birthday over the past year. We all had experienced lonelier birthdays than in years before, but while some of us felt they had a negative experience on their birthday, others appreciated the opportunity to spend their birthday by themselves or with one other person. This became known in the group as “the birthday experience,” and it even made it all the way into our final project. As an ensemble member, it was really fulfilling and exciting to take an idea we all had in the first week of the process and carry it through all the way into a staged creation. It’s one of the reasons devised theatre is a great method for full creative engagement; in traditional theatre, members normally only play one role in the creation of a

show, but in a devised piece, members play the roles of playwright, actor, director, and designers all at once.

After we shared our stories, we would join in a viewpoint exercise. Most of the time we practiced an “open viewpoint,” which means there are no restrictions on what actors can do in the space. These open viewpoints allowed us to explore possible story-lines and themes related to the stories we just shared. These viewpoints varied in length, as it’s common for ensemble members to collectively discover an ending moment, undetermined until it’s suddenly not. For our group, a single viewpoint session would last anywhere between 4 and 20 minutes. After a couple weeks we began adding limitations to our viewpoint sessions, such as confining the space we could use, specifying the energy level, and exploring a particular narrative. For example, in one viewpoint we decided that we could only use about a 20 foot by 20 foot square of land, we had to begin the viewpoint at an energy level of 1 and end the viewpoint at a level of 10 (on a scale of 1-10), and exploring elements of isolation and desire. These restrictions allowed us to generate interesting and specific material together, which was both fun and creatively inspiring.

It is also common to play music during a viewpoint, and our group played music for most of our viewpoint sessions. We developed a playlist of “pandemic songs”; songs that we listened to during the pandemic, songs that reminded us of the pandemic, or songs that we wanted to listen to now that we were able to meet in-person safely again. This playlist also became another source material for our group. I think this playlist had a tremendous impact on the way we connected inside of the viewpoint. Every time a song played, we knew that someone in the group had added it to the playlist because it meant something special to them, and it often provided a burst of inspiration in the creation of storylines. A lot of us in our story-sharing sessions had discussed missing the feeling of dancing in a group of people during the pandemic, and many of

us added upbeat dance songs to the playlist. This led to many spontaneous dance parties in our viewpoints, and it was a great moment of catharsis for us to participate in something that we've been wanting for so long, and dancing already activates all kinds of endorphins in the brain. All of the music included in the final piece is music from the pandemic playlist.

Recording Day

We recorded the whole piece in a single day, and we actually never had all six of us together at once. One of our members had an unexpected circumstance arise, and could only arrive after another member had to leave for a prior engagement. In any other situation, this would have been incredibly stressful to try and reconcile, but because we were already used to rehearsing without the whole ensemble, we were able to continue smoothly. We also had material generated that didn't involve all six members, so we didn't have to adjust the story around missing one person, but rather adjusted which pieces we wanted to include.

This was also our first day rehearsing with the furniture pieces. The idea to have living room furniture in the park for our piece was one we had thought of in the first couple weeks of the process, but as you can expect, the logistics of transporting a set of living room furniture to the park a few times a week are very difficult. We didn't generate material with the furniture specifically in mind, but I don't think we ever forgot the idea entirely. Once we started to get closer to recording day, we thought it would be fun to try and create new material with the furniture on the day of recording or to try and incorporate the furniture into a piece we had already created. Both of these ideas ended up in our final project. I spent a total of \$44.87 on a U-Haul for the day and lugged my (thankfully light) couch and coffee table to the park, and Carmen was generous enough to bring her living room lamp. The two days before had been

gorgeously sunny, but of course it was overcast and drizzling on the day of the shoot. But our group had no problem filming in the rain; we had rehearsed in the rain a few times before, and once, we shared a beautifully connected moment of dancing as soon as the rain started pouring on us in the middle of a viewpoint.

I was glad we followed our impulse to bring the furniture into the space. I think the visual was really powerful and evocative of our conversations together. We all had spent so much time in our homes, most of them small apartments, and Marina described the feeling as starting to feel like everything outside of her apartment wasn't real life, like she existed only in her own bubble. We all really loved this description, and the idea of the furniture in the park arose from wanting to make the setting look like someone's own little world. My favorite devised moments in the final piece are the scenes that involve the four ensemble members rotating the couch 90 degrees. These were moments we devised the day of the shoot, and it was a brand new concept that we discovered by viewpointing in the space with the furniture. It's really amazing what you can discover just by introducing new elements, like scenic pieces, to a space!

The final piece includes moments of our devised work and footage of interviews I conducted with each ensemble member, as well as an interview with myself. I had intended to include footage of a viewpoint session we were in, but didn't want to make the video too long. It was interesting to film many different moments at the park and then to assemble them at home on my computer in a way that made sense and had a flow throughout. This ended up being the natural conclusion to our project, since we had created lots of smaller scenes of content, rather than one story from beginning to end. It's possible that if we had been trying to create a fully polished devised play, we may have never considered the option of developing smaller pieces and stitching them together, so that was a fun and interesting development.

In the way that a plot keeps a story stitched together, the interviews I filmed are what connects the devised moments together into one narrative. These interviews don't even scratch the surface of all of the conversations we had over the course of the project, but they provide the perfect amount of insight into how the pandemic and this devising project affected the group. No one answers the same question or talks about the same topic, but somehow every story feels connected, like they all belong together in this little snapshot of what life was like for us over the pandemic. I feel extremely grateful to have found an ensemble that was so willing to be open and vulnerable about their experiences over the past year.

Findings

The process revealed some very fascinating findings. The most notable, in my opinion, is the effect of stories on the behavior of the following viewpoint session. Our group began to notice that when we shared stories about positive pandemic experiences or connections made, this often led to use of less space and close, intimate moments between people in the viewpoint. But when we shared stories about negative pandemic experiences or connections lost, this often led to use of more space and greater distance between people in the viewpoint. There is little to no verbal communication in a viewpoint, so these decisions were a natural reaction to ingesting the stories we just heard and living them subconsciously through our bodies and in our relationships with each other in the space. I had no idea that telling stories before the viewpoint would have this kind of impact, and this is definitely something I will utilize in the future if I work on another devised project.

I was also surprised by the impact our piece had on an audience. A common fear for an artist is that the project you're working on just doesn't work for an audience, and I wasn't sure if

our pieces would communicate the ideas we hoped it would, especially because some of our moments were devised the day of recording. I was overjoyed to receive positive feedback from faculty, family, and peers who watched the performance, and even more excited to hear about moments in the piece that resonated with viewers. I feel like there must be no greater feeling for an artist than that. One audience member (totally not my mom) remarked, “The couch pivot and the one student’s realization that the pandemic hadn’t changed their life much because they went into it lonely broke my heart. You would have to be dead not to feel the waves of loneliness coming over through the whole thing,” (Benson 2021). This comment made me realize that even though a good amount of the work we did was assembled on the final day, all of our days of rehearsals before then weren’t wasted time or missed opportunities. That time had been used to develop a strong bond between us, and strengthened our connection with the themes we’d discovered so that when we improvised something those ideas were already alive and present in the piece without having to spend weeks rehearsing and perfecting it. This is truly the amazing part of working with a close ensemble of creators, and I feel so privileged to have had this experience with these lovely people.

Results

Although this isn’t an experiment in the sense that there is replicable methodology or quantitative data to support my hypothesis, I am relying on the qualitative data gathered from my ensemble members to judge the effects of a project like this as drama therapy. However, I am not a psychologist or mental health specialist, and we did not have the benefit of having one with us for our rehearsal process, so I cannot make any scientific claims about this project as certified drama therapy. But this qualitative data is important to me as an artist, a director, and an artistic

collaborator. This is also why I decided to be a part of the experiment, even though most researchers would keep themselves separate from the participants. Theatre, particularly performing and creating, are things that someone must actively engage in to learn about them, especially through something as physical as devised theatre. I simply would not have gathered as much information if I had not also participated in the project with everyone else. These results are helpful for preparing me for projects I'd like to take on in the future that involve applied theatre techniques or theatre for social change. I've measured the effectiveness of this experiment based on the three reasons I highlighted in my initial research essay for using devised theatre as drama therapy: the highly physical nature of the form, the empowerment that comes from engaging in the creative process, and the connections that are built within the community.

The physical nature of the work was very effective in allowing us to express ourselves in a therapeutic way. A recurring theme of childhood and play time emerged in our viewpoints, likely from the access to outdoor space and the presence of a playground nearby. We often found ourselves feeling more connected with the nature around us, such as the trees, grass, and birds, more than we do in our civilian life. Most of the actor's work in a viewpoint is to kinesthetically respond to stimulus, and we found ourselves not only reacting to each other but to the sound of our surroundings and the changing of the environment.

Using our own experiences and music we'd selected as our source material was a great way for us to participate fully in the creative process and feel a strong sense of ownership in our work. All of our devised moments that are in the final piece are directly inspired by stories shared by members of the ensemble, and in the editing process I did my best to give everyone a special moment where they are the focus of the piece. To see our project go from stories being shared with each other to a fully-realized creative production in only eight short weeks was so

empowering as an artist, and the positive feedback I received on the piece have encouraged me to continue doing this kind of work. I am excited about what I could create in the future with more rehearsal time, without having to juggle college on top of it all!

I would definitely say this project has given all six of us a sense of community with each other, as well as connecting us to the larger community of Western Washington University and Bellingham. Very quickly our group discovered that physical touch had a newfound power and communicated a very strong message to all of us, since we had all endured the past year quarantined away from friends and family. When we talked about moments in the viewpoints that we were particularly drawn to, we often picked out moments where all six of us felt especially connected with each other, which can happen when all of us react to an impulse collectively, or when we all seem to be in sync with each other as we move about the space. One of the great things about our location was its popularity amongst dog owners, and dogs were incredibly excited to see a bunch of humans running around acting silly in the grass. We often had conversations with dog owners who were interested in our project, and began seeing some people (and dogs) multiple times. This was really special to all of us, and I think provided us a sense of belonging to a community larger than our group, which is a very comforting sensation. By the end of the project, a strong bond could be felt between all six of us, and we all agreed we would love to continue meeting over the summer to viewpoint together and share time and space creatively together, even if it's not for some project or deadline. This is by far the most rewarding part of this project for me. Even if I'm totally incorrect about devising as an effective form of drama therapy, at least I was able to bring six creative people together to enjoy each other's company and grow as artists, and that's invaluable to me.

Conclusion

With these results, I would confidently assess that for this group in particular, devising proved to be an effective method for working through and processing trauma from the COVID-19 pandemic. If I were to continue this work, I would love to collaborate with a mental health professional to accurately assess therapeutic value, and also explore what would happen if we were given more time and a live audience. I am excited to continue this journey exploring the intersection between theatre, social science, and healing.

Notes

If you'd like to read my initial research paper titled, "Devising as Drama Therapy for Survivors of War-Related Trauma", please contact me (Erin Smith) at erinsmiththeatremaker@gmail.com.

The full video presentation of "Making Theatre in the Pandemic: An Experiment in Devising" can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3p4d6T3L48&t=21s>.

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