

IN THE TELLING: THEATRICAL DEVISING PRACTICE
AS PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY

A PROJECT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

IN THE TELLING: THEATRICAL DEVISING PRACTICE

AS PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY

By

Julie Hunicutt

May 2018

A detailed account and analysis of a six-week theatrical devising workshop and culminating performance event which occurred in March and April of 2017 in the Theatre Arts Department at California State University, Long Beach. *In The Telling* was an independent project that utilized movement-based ensemble practice and improvisation techniques to develop text and movement into an immersive theatrical storytelling event. Through the synthesis of contemporary theatre-making practice and traditional rehearsal techniques, a diverse group of student participants collaborated to create an original work based on personal narrative and the theme of “change.”

Rooted in a broader discussion regarding the ideal foundational elements for contemporary performance training, this project report poses the question: how can performance educators train the next generation of theater makers to excel at creating vibrant, inclusive and innovative work? The *In The Telling* project posits that theatrical devising practice as performance pedagogy is one approach.

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CHAPTER 1

MOTIVATION AND INNOVATION

The decision to pursue my MFA in Acting with a focus on performance pedagogy is motivated by my desire to become a more effective teacher. As a mid-career theatre professional, I seek to share the gifts of mentorship, training and experience that I have received with the next generation of theatre professionals. My extensive experience with Viewpoints technique and ensemble-based work, my training in improvisation and dance, and twelve years experience as a certified yoga instructor are among the factors that led me to a specialization in movement methodology for performing arts education. As I advance through the graduate program at California State University, Long Beach, I seek to synthesize the movement fundamentals of my early acting training with new methods and practices. One of my goals as an educator is to develop new approaches to movement technique and bring these innovative practices into my classroom.

As I move into a new phase of my career as a theatre professional and an educator, my artistic goals have evolved. I have an interest in exploring different approaches to creative work. I desire to expand my knowledge of theatrical design and to deepen my creative engagement with light, space, sound and architecture. I seek the challenges of creating site-specific theatre and devised work, and to explore the applications of devising and improvisation techniques to scripted work. I am curious about the development and practice of rehearsal techniques that allow for unstructured elements in both process and performance. These artistic inquiries combined with my interest in movement methodology led me to initiate the *In The Telling* project. This six-week theatrical devising workshop and culminating performance occurred in March and April of 2017 in the Theatre Arts Department at California State University, Long

Beach. *In The Telling* was an independent project in conjunction with CSULB's student performance group, Theatre Threshold. An ensemble of seven Theatre Arts students collaborated in the six-week workshop and culminating event, and participated in a post-project seminar that was open to the entire department.

Each year the CSULB Theatre Arts Department infuses the greater community with eager, aspiring performers. When considering actor training specific to the student population at CSULB, issues concerning the diversity of actors, of creators, and of producers working in commercial theatre are especially relevant. As a theatre arts educator in an institution committed to inclusivity, I believe it is valuable to consider the extent to which the current professional theatre model is sustainable, how long this model will exist, and in what ways this model is changing. A 2015 *New York Times* article discussing the diversity represented on that season's Broadway stages speaks to the complex issues of growth and sustainability in commercial theatre. The article reflects that:

Those who work on Broadway caution against extrapolating too much from one theatrical year, noting that there is no artistic director looking for balance in programming a season — just a collection of producers and theater owners, trying to figure out how to make money and art at the same time..."I'm very heartened that our stages are starting to look more like our city," said Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator and star of "Hamilton". Mr. Miranda said that even with more diverse casts and story lines, audience diversity remains a serious concern, which he attributed in part to the high cost of tickets. "The pricing is above my pay grade to solve, because mounting shows is really expensive, and producers price aggressively to make money back for their investors — that's their job, but at the same time it's crazy how expensive they are," he said. "And there are many

people for whom it's not even a thing on their radar, so hopefully these shows will become destinations for diverse audiences, and then that starts the next generation going.” (Paulson)

I have directly encountered these issues – the rising cost of making theatre, the lack of diversity represented in American theatre audiences and in the stories and relationships depicted on stage – in my career as a theatre professional. As I serve the CSULB community, I find myself asking: Are the emerging artists graduating from our Theatre Arts program truly prepared for the uncertain and volatile environment of the contemporary American theatre? Do these young theater makers possess the critical and creative thinking necessary to take on these issues they will inevitably encounter? Have they been empowered to make their own work, tell their own stories, and collaborate with other artists? In short, are we as performance educators training the next generation of theater makers to excel at the theater that has been or the theater that will be?

When training theatre artists I believe attention payed to innovative contemporary theatrical forms is equal in value to the practice of classical methodologies and the replication of popular theatrical styles. Pursuing my master's degree has afforded me the opportunity to critically examine the specific aspects of performance that I find compelling as an audience member. In the last decade I have been exposed to many artists and new works that are exciting, imaginative and provocative. At the Rude Mech's "Method Gun," or watching a seasoned ensemble artfully execute an improvised performance, I have been delighted by the skillful inclusion of "happy accidents" that can elevate a work from technically masterful to transcendent. I have been enchanted by a young ensemble's adapted short fable – riveting in its simplicity and economy and alive in space and form. I have been inspired by SITI Company's imaginative use

of disorientation and repetition in a developing work. Spellbound by the narrative structure of Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, Marco Ramirez's use of negative space and stylized movement in *The Royale*, and Geoff Sobelle's inclusion of live recording and illusion in *The Object Lesson*, I think to myself: this is exciting! This is work worth exploring! This work is singularly theatrical, collaborative, and challenges the audience! For students of theatre, there are valuable lessons to be learned from examining these types of performance and in practicing the creation of similar work. To do so, I believe we must synthesize new approaches to performance pedagogy and rehearsal practice with traditional methodologies.

As I dedicate myself more deeply to teaching, I have discovered that my observations regarding innovative theatrical work are particularly germane to my interest in developing movement and devising practices for actor training. As a teaching artist I am compelled to ask: When new and exciting work emerges, who is creating it? What new stories are these theatre artists telling? Who is watching this work and where? What technology is used or rejected in its creation? How might I teach my students to work in these new and exciting ways? More specifically, how might the graduates of the CSULB Theatre Arts Department benefit if they entered the profession with flexible skills, knowledge of innovative theatre practices, and the ability to work in collaborative environments? Most exciting of all: What effect might CSULB graduates trained in this way have on the continued evolution of theatre in America?

My intention was to use Viewpoints techniques in the *In The Telling* workshop and devising process to bridge the gap between the students' familiarity with storytelling rooted in psychology and a more abstract exploration of narrative and performance. In *The Viewpoints Book*, authors Anne Bogart and Tina Landau describe Viewpoints and Composition work as timeless; a system that belongs to "the natural principles of time and space" (7). As an actor, one

of the most valuable aspects of Viewpoints training is the way in which this practice heightens a performer's awareness of the body in relation to space and time. This experience of heightened awareness is manifested in an actor's ability to explore a diverse range of physical choices when embodying a character and illuminating relationships. An actor trained in Viewpoints technique can then integrate this expansive physicality into contemporary theatre training rooted in the style of natural realism. Exploration of this work is of great interest to me as I engage in the broader discussion regarding the ideal foundational elements for contemporary performance training.

Viewpoints training is a subjective experience, greatly dependent on key factors including the individual teacher, the environment in which this system is being taught, and the purpose for/process in which the Viewpoints concepts are being utilized. In the opening paragraphs of chapter 2 in *The Viewpoints Book*, the authors state:

- Viewpoints is a philosophy translated into technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage.
- Viewpoints is a set of names given to certain principles of movement through time and space; these names constitute a language for talking about what happens on stage.
- Viewpoints is points of awareness that a performer or creator makes use of while working. (Bogart and Landau 7)

Thus, in addition to its application in a traditional theatre setting, Viewpoints training supports a performer/creator of devised work and ensemble-based collaboration. The concentrated exploration of nine individual points of awareness not only builds the skills needed for an actor to communicate with a director, it also provides vocabulary for a group to talk about

how and what they are creating. Viewpoints practice labels these points of awareness: Tempo, Duration, Repetition, Shape, Special Relationship, Gesture, Architecture, Topography and Kinesthetic Response. Additionally, consideration of larger aspects of performance, including the use of the space in which the event takes place, staging of performers within the space, and the performer's relationship to other production elements become second nature to actors trained in advanced Viewpoints technique. In these ways, the inclusion of Viewpoints work would be fundamental to structuring the learning and practice environment for my project.

At the heart of the *In The Telling* project was my desire to create an active learning environment where students would encounter the complexities, challenges and rewards of collaborative theatre-making. I considered what experiences might provide these emerging artists the agency and skill set to create meaningful theatrical work independent of a producer, playwright, or company. I challenged myself to examine what performance practices might best serve emerging artists whose cultures and identities are underrepresented in commercial theatre. Ultimately I strove to facilitate a performance practice situation that would help equip students – in particular a diverse group of graduating seniors within CSULB's Theatre Arts Department – for rewarding careers as artists and theatre makers.

Considering the limited time and available resources for the *In The Telling* project, I outlined a few objectives for the project that I believed would serve the participating students. These aims were in conversation with my larger interests in movement training for actors, and would be supported by my knowledge of improvisation and ensemble-building techniques. In the creation of a devised practice workshop and culminating event, I sought to:

- Provide the student creators an experience of practical, repeatable skills useful to generate future devised work from stories and themes of personal significance.

- Develop a collective, theatrical narrative that reflects the diverse ensemble and would resonate with the similarly diverse audience of CSULB students.
- Expose the ensemble and the student audience to alternative theatre-making practices and unconventional theatrical structure.

Ideally, *In The Telling* would be a theatrical, magical, artful and immersive event using sparse production elements and limiting creative and material resources to those of the ensemble. It was therefore important to choose a space that would allow the participants to fully explore theatrical elements such as space, shape, time, emotion, movement, and story. It was of even greater importance that the individual cast members of the student ensemble each possessed curiosity, a willingness to take risks, and a desire to work collaboratively. With these goals in mind, in February of 2017 I began to construct the schedule, assemble the cast, and finalize the space.

CHAPTER 2

THE SPACE AND THE ENSEMBLE

With myself acting as director and fellow graduate student Kevin Johnson acting as both producer and ensemble cast member, we held auditions for *In The Telling*. Kevin is pursuing a double major in Theater Management and Business and has a background in performance. He shares my interest in devising and in developing rehearsal techniques and is the graduate advisor to Theatre Threshold, the CSULB student organization that provided administrative support for our project. In our planning and organizational phase, I allowed for two distinct possibilities in terms of culminating events. The first possibility was that the *In The Telling* project would conclude with an open rehearsal, rather than an event labeled as a performance. The second possibility was that the workshop ended with some sort of theatrical event with an invited audience. The intention behind this purposely open-ended structure was to establish a permissive creative environment by releasing the students from any preconceived ideas they might have about a final product. Absolved from result-oriented practice, I hoped to inspire a greater level of risk taking and creative experimentation.

I decided to follow a development structure more typical of a performance workshop rather than a traditional rehearsal process. The entire project would take place over the course of eight weeks, including the audition process. There was an approximate total of sixty-five hours dedicated to ensemble rehearsal time within the six-week workshop period. Rehearsals in weeks one to five were condensed into two consecutive, five-to-six-hour meetings each week. The rationale behind this schedule was that the ensemble would benefit from five days of independent work between group rehearsals. Guided by prompts, it was during the off days that the students would generate material and reflect upon that week's ensemble exploration. The

students would then bring new ideas and information into the following week's two-day intensive group work. This format would also be the beginning of the ensemble's exposure to a non-traditional rehearsal structure, and support the students as they practiced self-generating material.

In week six, the schedule included two consecutive evenings of five-hour group rehearsals, and an additional three sessions of four to five hours of open/flexible group time. These additional days were time for the culminating event in whatever form it eventually took. Collaborating with the Theatre Threshold student group would provide the *In The Telling* ensemble with an audience of their peers in the event that the workshop culminated in a performance of some kind. These same Theatre Threshold students would also be the ideal individuals to invite to an open rehearsal, if that particular culmination possibility was arrived at as the most desirable.

We chose the space based on its flexibility, size, and functionality. The convertible classroom we selected within the Theatre Arts Department would serve as both practice and potential performance space. The open, rectangular room provided about twenty-five feet by seventy feet of playing space, contained an ample amount of useful architecture including simple furniture, tumbling mats, and a few dozen wooden rehearsal cubes that could be used in an endless variety of ways to shape the space. A simple, fixed lighting grid with a few LED instruments and two-channel operating board was situated in the far section of the room, effectively lighting an area about twelve feet by fifteen feet total. There were overhead incandescent lights through the room, and a multidirectional sound system operated via the lighting board. There was grid system of tracks attached to the ceiling on which were hung several black fabric panels that extended from the ceiling to the floor. These same panels

extended the length of the longer walls, opposite the four doors leading into the room. Using the fabric panels, the entire space could be transformed into multiple playing areas that were easily created and dismantled, and the overall effect was a flexible, theatrical space.



FIGURE 1. *In The Telling* rehearsal. Fabric panels, overhead lighting, rehearsal blocks.

This space was ideal for Viewpoints exercises and composition work, and allowed for adaptive set elements that could evolve with the piece in the creation process. Students would be responsible for creating all of the theatrical elements of *In The Telling*, and the space we chose provided the essential ingredients for imaginative exploration of scenic, sound, and lighting components. The space also supported my goal of providing the participants an experience of

practical skills useful for making future devised work. As one of my early mentors once said to me, if you can make magic with one light, two actors, and two chairs – the rest is easy.

When I initially discussed the *In The Telling* project with Kevin, it was in the weeks immediately following the 2016 presidential election. Tempers and passions were high on campus, and the frustration, fear and discontent among the students in the Theatre Arts Department was palpable. Many students voiced their desire to make theatre in response to this huge political event, but most lacked the tools and training to generate original material. It seemed a perfect time for a devising workshop to take place in the department. Inspired by the students' enthusiasm to make their own work, and in response to divisive issues surrounding the election, Kevin and I pondered the question of theatre's power to catalyze change. What sort of stories actually change a person? This led us to a prompt that served as the starting point for *In The Telling*. Students auditioning for our project were asked to tell a story that fundamentally changed them. The hope was that this prompt would elicit narratives of personal significance and illuminate themes that resonated with the students. Ultimately, Kevin and I chose the cast of *In The Telling* based on not only each individual actor's ability to tell a story, but also which stories might serve as a compelling starting point for our devising process.

Once cast, our ensemble included five undergraduate students and two graduate students. The undergraduates were all in their final year at CSULB, pursuing BA degrees in Theatre. The two graduate students were both double majors in Theatre Management and Business who possessed some performance experience. The cast of *In The Telling* represented a range of ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and more than half the ensemble identified as members of LGBTQ+ communities. This diversity of experience was reflected in the stories the actors shared during the audition process and is representative of the larger CSULB student population.

Inspired by the narratives in the audition, I asked the ensemble to contemplate an additional story in response to the original prompt in advance of our first rehearsal. Since some of the ensemble members' audition stories were first person accounts and other stories were third person narrative, the assignment was to offer a second story told from a different point of view than their audition story. The resulting collection of stories of personal significance provided text with which to begin our workshop process.

CHAPTER 3

ENSEMBLE EXPLORATION AND CREATIVE COLLABORATION

During the initial phase of the creation process, weeks one and two, the cast quickly formed into a close-knit ensemble. The theme of change was present in each narrative and I observed that in the telling of these stories, the unique voice of each storyteller was revealed. In the revelation of the individuals to the group, I witnessed signs of a bond taking shape among the ensemble. Respect and trust were a requirement in the room, and within this safe and supportive environment the students shared their deeply personal stories.

In the first phase of the workshop, the ensemble members' original stories served as our text the way in which a play script would function in a traditional rehearsal process. We examined themes, questions and relationships that arose from the examination of the individual cast members' stories. We explored the collection of stories beginning with theatrical forms familiar to the students such as constructing elements of the narratives into monologues and scenes. The collection of stories was examined by the entire ensemble: as a group, in pairs and individually. We explored text through oral storytelling traditions and applied contemporary devising exercises to distill, refract, and examine the text from multiple points of view.

The majority of the cast members had little to no experience with theatrical devising techniques. Nearly all of cast members' performance experiences were limited to conventional rehearsal and performance structures associated with scripted work and/or Natural Realism. Many of the Viewpoints exercises and composition work I utilized in this phase of rehearsal were new to the ensemble. Free-writing and physical improvisation techniques also helped to develop the content during weeks one and two, and exercises were explored in repetition. I chose

exercises that, in my experience, are consistent in yielded results when generating text and creative material, and facilitate examination of story, emotion and space.



FIGURE 2. *In The Telling* rehearsal, working pairs/sharing personal stories.

Homework in weeks one and two included using the stories as inspiration for original text such as poems or songs in order to examine the story elements outside the framework of a monologue or scene. The ensemble was also encouraged to collect found text that seemed to be in conversation with any of the stories. This material would ultimately be used as a way to bridge the personal stories and connect themes and relationships into the eventual overarching narrative. I also suggested that the cast listen to some examples of contemporary narrative podcasts as inspiration for the use of non-textual sound in storytelling. This research was one example of preparing the students for future consideration of technical elements within our piece such as sound.

Some challenges that occurred during this period included encountering the actors' unfamiliarity with abstract storytelling and the temptation for the ensemble to make firm decisions too early in the rehearsal process. One exercise that was particularly useful during this phase involved distilling each of the personal stories down to a series of nouns and expressive gestures that corresponded to those nouns. Through this exercise the students experienced the power of images in theatrical storytelling and received a practical tool for examining text in any theatrical form. I observed the students make strong, artful choices about what they perceived were the most essential elements of the stories. This exploration led to the illumination of significant relationships within the stories and to useful information about location and objects. The cast began to notice narrative connections between places, people, and things. One happy accident that occurred during this period resulted in the conclusion that some of the stories were best illuminated non-verbally. What began as a miscommunication during the explanation of an exercise yielded an interpretation of one story that would later become an essential element of the final piece. We discovered which of the stories most strongly resonated with the group and which contained elements that were highly theatrical. The ensemble made lists of questions that were sparked by each of the narratives, and noted the characters and relationships within the stories that they found most compelling. This information became the foundation for the second phase of the rehearsal process.

In the second phase (weeks three and four) we explored the text in more physically dynamic ways, allowing the stories to change or expand as the ensemble considered the performance space, individual actor movement, and relationships between performers and objects. We also began to incorporate light and sound into our work, with the cast taking



FIGURE 3. Ensemble members experimenting with theatrical lighting.

responsibility for all of the theatrical elements in the piece. Homework in preparation for rehearsal during this period included writing first drafts of monologues, scenes, and poems, the gathering of potential light sources, collecting objects relevant to the stories, and compiling sound samples that were in direct or indirect conversation with the material. The preparation of text would move us closer to a finalized script as we continued to develop the collective narrative. The collection of objects, light sources and sound samples built our arsenal of resources to facilitate continued exploration of the space in rehearsal and would eventually contribute to the technical elements of the piece.

One such exercise during this period randomly paired an important noun/object from one story with an activity from a different story to create a prompt for a semi-improvised composition. One such composition prompt was “Create a ritual for a tube of lipstick.” Out of this exercise emerged a scene entitled Lipstick Ritual that became pivotal in the final piece. It was the first scene created by the ensemble that was simultaneously an expression of one cast member’s specific, personal narrative while illuminating a broader theme of the play. This was also one of the first moments in the creation process where the ensemble incorporated sound, light, and abstract use of space and objects independent of a prompt. For me, this marked the beginning of the ensemble’s journey towards agency and ownership of the piece they created.

As we deepened our investigation of the stories, new challenges emerged. I encouraged the cast to not shy away from creative conflicts that arose between individual cast members. I suggested considering the ways in which friction is useful to the art-making process when there exists a contract of mutual respect among the ensemble. I acknowledged making theatre in a collective was not always comfortable. I invited the cast to be vulnerable in their work. I observed individual actors experience the power of placing their attention on being in service of each other and the piece. I witnessed the ensemble work to creatively solve the problem of telling one particularly sensitive story without violating the safety or privacy of the individuals involved.

The diverse cast encountered complicated issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation in the depictions of violence, power, and romantic relationships. At one point in week four, the discovery was made that the ensemble had inadvertently assigned roles in specific scenes that reinforced negative stereotypes in regard to gender and race. This realization prompted a

discussion that shaped the theme of the final piece and inspired creative choices in regard to the depiction of certain characters within the stories.

The cast began to experiment with sound in the form of soundscape, musical scoring and voice-over. Tone and style began to emerge as the group connected stories together and developed an aesthetic as an ensemble. The introduction of light played an important role in this stage of the process as well. The majority of the cast had little to no practical experience with theatrical lighting. Experimenting with shadow-play, using light to manipulate space, and the use of a scrim were new experiences for most of the actors, and the hands-on experimentation yielded transformative discoveries. Finally, it was at the end of week four when the ensemble decided that the project would culminate in a performance rather than an invited rehearsal, and we began to consider the role of audience in the piece.

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICE

Weeks five and six were the third and final phase of our process. During these weeks the ensemble solidified the stories, refined theme and dramatic structure, and clarified scripted text. Homework in preparation for weeks five and six included finalizing the assignment of roles and eliminating non-essential elements from the individual stories. A scripted structure developed similar to that of a long-form improvised performance: one continuous linear narrative following two characters' journey and a series of related, but separate, interludes in conversation with the linear story. As technical elements and staging crystallized, the cast decided that there would be no fixed audience seating. The audience would freely move through the space and democratically receive the performance. Inclusion of this element led to the creation of seven playing areas and a pre-show portion of the performance that would utilize the entire playing space as the audience assembled.

This decision in regard to the audience also presented additional challenges. The cast was as unfamiliar with this style of audience mobility as were many of the potential invitees. In our struggles to include this level of audience autonomy, we arrived at a creative solution that served my greater goals in regards to the broader community of students in the Theatre Arts Department. We decided to use our three flexible dates in week six not as three separate performance time slots, but rather as three separate events.

The first event we called a “participatory ensemble rehearsal” which we described as “one part rehearsal and one part workshop.” We asked invitees to join us as we explored the role that the audience would play in our performance. This event included performing two short sections of the piece in repetition, allowing the invited participants to determine the best places

to position themselves as viewers. After this exploration I facilitated a conversation between the invitees and the cast on how best to include and consider the audience in our piece. From this dialogue emerged such revelations as the usefulness of offering explicit permission to the audience to move about the space. Another discovery during the participatory audience rehearsal led to the incorporation of small LED tea lights distributed to the audience as they entered the space. This had the theatrical effect of enhancing a magical element of our story while solving a practical problem of lighting in a particular scene.

On the second of the three final days the ensemble performed *In The Telling* in its entirety for the first (and only) time in the presence of an invited audience. Labeled as a Theatrical Happening, the piece was successfully and artfully executed by the ensemble. There was a significantly larger audience in attendance than on the previous night and this element greatly enhanced the immersive aspects of the piece. I observed a range of emotional responses from the audience, many of whom later expressed a connection to the themes and relationships explored in the piece. After the performance, I observed audience members commenting on the use of space, strong theatrical images, and abstract narrative structure in positive ways. The ensemble was proud of the performance and expressed their enjoyment in sharing the piece with their CSULB community.

The final day of week six was an event open to the whole department that we labeled Collaboration Practice. At this event, I facilitated a dialogue that considered the role of devising within the CSULB Theatre Arts Department and in our work as artists and performers. This was an opportunity for the ensemble to discuss their experience of the project and talk about what they learned from the process with their peers. I was especially pleased with the cast's response to my question: In what ways did this project directly connect to your classroom experiences in

the Theatre Arts Department? The cast gave specific examples of the ways in which they believe the practice of creating devised work supports their goals as emerging artists and theatre professionals and complements traditional actor training. In the last portion of this event, the *In The Telling* cast led attendee participants in a devising exercise.

In a meeting before this event, I met with the cast to discuss how we would structure the panel discussion and group activity. Together we chose one material-generating exercise that was especially useful to the *In The Telling* creation process to share with the student attendees. In pairs, the cast would lead the participants through the exercise that led to the creation of the Lipstick Ritual scene. This exercise could be quickly explained and accommodated large groups working simultaneously. During the activity portion of the event, we divided up attendees into groups of approximately fifteen students, each led by a pair of cast members. It was especially gratifying to watch the ensemble engage in teaching their peers this exercise. Witnessing the cast share their new knowledge of a specific devising technique with their community was, for me, the culminating event of the *In The Telling* project.

CHAPTER 5

AFTER THE TELLING

As an educator and a theatre maker I found the entire experience of *In The Telling* to be gratifying, humbling, and joyful. It was a gift to watch emerging artists discover new ways of creating theatre and give voice to their stories and ideas. I confirmed my belief that devising practice can be an effective and transformative component of contemporary actor training. I observed the ensemble members gain confidence in their abilities to generate original material and work in collaborative environments. I witnessed the cast make creative use of space, sound, light, and architecture to collectively tell stories that resonated with their community. I perceived a shift in the performers' ability to utilize unconventional theatrical structure and consciously consider the role of the audience.

Reflecting on my original goals for the *In The Telling* project, I believe the creation process, performance and post-performance event met and exceeded these aims. Written responses from the cast support this assertion and highlight the ensemble members' positive experience. On the topic of practical, repeatable skills useful to generate future devised work from stories and themes of personal significance, some cast responses include:

RH: The exercise that sticks out in my head the most was the exercise of telling and being told a story with a partner and recreating it through gesture and text that was simplified in minute to second increments.

SP: The box exercise- telling each other's stories in less and less time until we eventually only had one word. It really made us know what the story was truly about.

BO: My favorite exercise of *In the Telling* was when we each told other's stories with no words...I was satisfied and compelled in not actually knowing the full story and was

interested in the different ways everyone delivered their partners stories. A sense of knowing the story still is being taken care of...

ML: [T]he group and I created a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end...using no text and just movement. We were all reacting to each other's decisions and in the end we created an organic story..Another exercise was when we each paired with someone and told our partner a story...we had to tell the entire group our partner's story in our own words... [then] simplify their story to the most essential parts. That was a very informative experience for me...

BO: The "Yes, and" mentality really helped me see how far we can go...

SP: The rehearsal process was really what ITT was. It wasn't about the performance...Creating the piece from the ground up... there's nothing like it. We have to learn to bring the connection and personal life of devised pieces to other stage work.

KJ:[B]eing asked to retell your partner's story at an increasingly faster pace immediately connected me...to the emotions my partner felt. My work as an actor is to put my mind, heart and body into a situation that is not my own, to strip away myself in service of telling the story of another and becoming that other. This exercise immediately plunged my psyche and body into another's...

BO: [W]e all joined together to do this lipstick ritual out of nouns that came out of our original stories and we created this tribal chant...as an ensemble.

When considering our development of a collective, theatrical narrative that reflected the diverse ensemble and the ways in which it resonated with the CSULB student audience, the cast expressed these thoughts:

RH: [I]t came down to the end and everyone was able to come together, through helpful direction, to create something that was magical.

ML: [E]veryone's story complimented each other's...even though my story didn't have anything to do with the main story arc, it still was relevant to the piece and it belonged to the production.

BO: A moment of revelation and discovery was...[---] not be paired up with [---] in a violent scene because of what an audience might perceive...a black man hitting a woman - that adds to a horrible stereotype where black men are seen as domestic abusers...[The discussion also] opened up the opportunity to voice that we should not only have heteronormative partnering but also homosexual partnership. This moment led me to not be afraid to voice a different opinion or thought in the process...making theatre that challenges the ensemble on how audiences might perceive certain choices we make as a group.

RH: There were moments of fear especially performing the section of my story but that was also a moment of joy because I was held by the ensemble and it was not about me but about everyone that was involved. There was a sense of discovery and wonder...

ML: I remember how engaged the audience was and how eager they looked to discover what was going to happen next.

BO: [quoting an audience member]"It was awesome, I loved the way the story was bigger than any one actor"...everyone that I spoke with said that they enjoyed the show. For many of them it was the first time they had watched something like what we created.

In response to their exposure to alternative theatre-making practices and exploration of unconventional theatrical structure, the ensemble members commented that:

BO: [I]t was fun exploring different parts of the space...a giant room become so many different rooms just by changing the position of the chairs, curtain, and boxes.

SP: Devising is [expletive] terrifying, which makes doing it rewarding and valuable. I'm a person who likes to have answers...That was a good kind of challenge for me. Letting go.

BO: [E]xploring, creating and taking care of each other's stories and not trying to achieve this "complete" performance was helpful to keep in mind. [To] not really worry too much if the audience gets it, but instead invite them to have an experience with us as we tell the story.

SP: Audience interaction! They [were] there with us, experiencing it with us...A part of the show. Not merely spectators.

RH: Audience members said that it was powerful and unlike anything that they had ever seen, they also said it was refreshing because it was unlike the current or past shows done at CSULB.

Finally, I asked the cast to share their big takeaways and/or any personal insight gained from their experience of the *In the Telling* project.

KJ: Reflecting back now, this show is one of the most dynamic pieces of art I've ever been a part of...Abstracting this story the way we did, adding the oscillation of joy and terror, regret and elation...

ML: This was not my first time being a part of a devised piece...I knew that everyone (including myself) had ideas...I also knew that not everyone would agree on every idea

and that would cause some conflict. I think everyone handled all of the critiques very well and in the end we always respected each other...

BO: [It] inspired me to make my own art.

RH: The experience was very valuable in my work because I have a better sense of group dynamics and how to help the ensemble through play and commitment to the work.

Being a better collaborator makes you a better artist and I have grown leaps and bounds through this project.

SP:[I learned t]hat life and theatre are processes. We can't control them. They come in waves of pain, fear, brilliance and utter love. It's all messy. Control is a joke... Ensemble work and devised pieces help me so immensely to let go and play...I've never felt more connected to an ensemble.

ML: This experience was tremendously valuable to me...a combination of everything I had learned as a student at CSULB. *In The Telling* gave me the opportunity to work as an ensemble, to utilize movement, to utilize architecture, to utilize my voice, to take up space, and to be seen and heard...[It] pushed me towards the direction I know I need to head as an actor and as a human.

The thoughts and feelings that the cast shared were invaluable to me as an educator. Their response to the workshop process affirmed my commitment to developing new approaches to movement technique and my desire to incorporate these practices into my teaching. Observing the enthusiasm of the ensemble during the creation of the *In The Telling* final piece has deepened my desire to explore different approaches to creative work. I am inspired by the many ways in which the student creators rose to the challenge of creating devised work. I am further compelled

to develop innovative rehearsal and devising techniques that support emerging artists who desire to create theatre that reflects a diversity of voices, backgrounds and identities.

In The Telling provided me a valuable opportunity to explore ensemble-based devising practice as an effective teaching tool for performance training. It was joyful to witness the students' acts of artistic bravery and curiosity, and their dedication to each other and the piece. Creating the structure and facilitating the creation process was equal parts humbling and invigorating. My journey from the conception of the *In The Telling* project through the three-part culmination was a significant milestone in my graduate experience.

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