

Play-building: Creating a Documentary Theatre Performance in a High School Setting

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Abstract

This paper describes a high school theatre program's project in which Anna Deavere Smith's documentary theatre work serves as the foundation for play-building for students. Research in theatre arts supports the use of play-building as a way to explore major themes of relevance to students. However, there is little research addressing documentary theatre's use in a high school setting. Teacher and students created a full-length dramatic play which incorporated interviews of actual people related to the theme; in this case an exploration of dreams, both aspirational and nocturnal, entitled *Dreaming: Day and Night*. After transcribing the interviews, an edited script weaving together the different perspectives of the interviewees, came to fruition. Students rehearsed and performed the script along with other material. The thesis project sought to record student responses to the work, especially in relation to the areas of relevance, engagement and empathy. At the end of the production students were interviewed in a focus group format by the instructor in order to collect information. Findings indicate that documentary theatre can prove relevant and engaging for students; findings indicate it can encourage a high degree of empathy as well.

Chapter 1 Introduction

I have been teaching theatre in a secondary classroom setting for close to twenty years. Over that time I built up considerable anecdotal evidence that theatre benefits students in many ways beyond the stage. Students, colleagues, parents and friends all comment on the changes they note both on stage and off in students' confidence, facility with language, physical and vocal powers of expression, among other benefits. Most of these experiences have been formed through traditional play-performance models, where students audition for and then perform traditional texts from professional playwrights. Most all of the plays have found the students immersed in work rewarding and satisfying for many reasons.

For several years now I have also experimented with less traditional models of theatre work with students and texts. While teaching middle school, for example, I worked with students to create original, live versions based on the long-running NBC comedy staple, Saturday Night Live. These shows featured student writing, student and teacher bands and alumni guest hosts. I also worked with students to create original "sitcoms." These shows often integrated familiar pop cultural references, and even more local town and community ones, stretching from the school itself to teachers' hometowns. Oftentimes, faculty participated in small roles, or students portrayed the teachers themselves. Last year at my current school we utilized two years of student poetry to choreograph a production we called "Poetry in Motion."

My experience working with students in these less traditional theatre models has often felt the most rewarding to the students and myself. Not only were they finding themselves in unfamiliar characters, they also had a hand in creating them from both their own experiences and others. Last year in my junior English class we investigated the work of the actress and educator

Anna Deavere Smith. Her work interviewing real people around important moments and themes in America struck me as another intriguing possibility. In considering Smith's documentary work and comparing it with my own play-building work with students, I wondered what utilizing Smith's approach might yield for students.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional play production in a high school setting has most commonly meant students working on a production of a professional playwright's work. The degree of relevance and engagement of the text itself to the students' own lives has usually been a secondary consideration in mounting a production. While students can certainly find satisfaction in performing characters and imagining worlds greatly different from their own, my work seeks to explore whether creating a stronger connection to the students through a play-building approach in which they help to create the text itself and interact with real people and their stories, produces a different kind of relevance, empathy and engagement.

Purpose

My work defines the different outcomes for students' participation in plays that originate from their own profound, personal interests. I discover whether plays that originate from students themselves around issues and/or themes interesting and/or important to them create higher levels of relevance, engagement and empathy. I document student responses to a process in which they interact with and then present real people whom they have met.

Theoretical Rationale

Empathy has often been used in discussions of art work, including drama. Playwrights going back as far as the Greeks (Blank & Jensen, 2005) have expressed an interest in eliciting an empathetic response from audience members viewing the work. Modern theatre artists like

Augusto Boal (1985) have sought to move theatre beyond empathy to action. Boal's work seeks to empower people for social and political change. I explore the connections between relevance, engagement and empathy for high school students when working toward and in a production that springs from their own interests, and engages them directly with real interview subjects.

Assumptions

My approach assumes that different kinds of theatre, from more traditional models to more recent progressive ones, produce different effects upon the theatre-makers themselves. Part of the theatre process for an actor involves a number of steps in order to realize a character fully on stage. My approach assumes that interviewing real-life people around issues of relevance both to the interviewer (student) and the interviewee might lead to different levels of engagement, relevance and empathy.

Background and Need

Albert (1999) profiles dramatist Anna Deveare Smith, who won the MacArthur Foundation "genius" award in 1996. In writing a play, Smith interviews hundreds of subjects and invites them to be embodied for her stage presentations, as in the case of "Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992." Smith conceptualized the idea of a series of dramatic presentations exploring American characters following her graduation from the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, California. Her early performance piece in this series is called "On the Road: A Search for American Character," and it played at the Eureka Theater in 1990. She also produced her play, "Fires in the Mirror," in 1996, at the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island. Other theatre companies, including perhaps most famously, The Tectonic Theatre Project, through their *Laramie Project* production, have further employed the technique and have earned praise. I found no research, however, regarding the use of documentary theatre in school settings.

Summary

While some research has been done regarding play-building and its use in addressing contemporary issues of relevance to students, I found none related to documentary theatre techniques. And yet in attempting to create just such a project myself, I discovered several other secondary schools and one specific theatre company that utilizes this approach within a 10 mile radius. Conducting research related to this field may help to define its benefits and costs and possibly help to create a model for what works and what does not when attempting this type of theatre work with students.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

The review of the literature spans research associated with secondary theatre education, including the effect of students' participation on their social maturity and the use of playbuilding as a theatre model for students.

Review of Previous Research

Social Maturity

Beales and Zemel (1990) examined the effect participation in a high school drama program had on students' social maturity relative to peers who were not enrolled in a drama program. They conducted their study in a 9th-through 12th-grade high school of 850 students total in British Columbia, using 20 drama and 20 art students as experimental and control groups respectively. The students were given pretests and posttests on the CPI and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale at a 6-month interval. The CPI scales showed that seven drama students did mature more in certain areas of social maturity vs. their art counterparts. The study identified a variety of situations in which students might find theatre a beneficial activity in terms of developing social maturity. It suggests a usefulness of participation in a drama program that yields benefits to students outside the theatre and that translates to their daily lives. Beales and Zemel describe the theatre program as consisting of dramatic activity that includes traditional theatre games and activities. My thesis identifies similar benefits and costs, but ones which specifically stem from the students' direct interaction with their outside world. Utilizing documentary theatre and play-building models around issues of relevance to students as a starting point, it describes benefits to students from this specific type of theatre.

Play-building

Lang (2007) researched secondary students' and teachers' understanding of collective theatre creation as an art form. Visiting two different Canadian secondary school classrooms, one 10th grade and one 11th, where students worked with their schools' theatre teachers to create theatre pieces of their own creation through a collaborative process, Lang interviewed students privately and anonymously both pre- and post- performance to capture their experience and growth. The students' performances varied in content and structure, but revolved around subject matter of interest to them. One student production focused on the theme of "fitting in" in a high school setting; the other traced a more adult couple's relationship. Combining monologues, mime, songs, and more traditional narrative structures, the plays form and content was driven by the students themselves.

Interviewed students reported a mixture of positive and negative reactions to the experience. Positive comments included an appreciation of the challenges and rewards of cooperation and teamwork and increased interest with featured physical theatre forms like mime and tableau. Students expressed frustration with the challenges of time management, and with less guidance and feedback from the teacher expert. Interestingly, students most involved in the regular theatre program expressed the most reservations with the experience. While my research will undoubtedly encounter these issues as well, it seeks also to gauge students' empathetic response and intellectual engagement with the material itself. The interview model Lang presents is one in which the students are interviewed at three different times regarding their expectations, active experience, and post-production. I interviewed the students about their experience after the production finished. As the teacher ultimately overseeing student work, I also, as Lang did, observed it in process.

Interview with an Expert

I interviewed Annie E., the performing arts chair and a fellow English and theatre teacher at another Northern California private high school on December 3rd, 2012. Ms. E. has helped students create four productions using documentary theatre techniques. She has also directed professional actors in a San Francisco production entitled *Tenderloin*. She studied at the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard.

Following is a summary of her experience creating documentary theatre work with secondary students.

Describe your training and general experience working with students and play-building, specifically documentary theatre.

Ms. E. has been working with students for about 25 years. Her experiences in play-building began in Vermont with a theatre company, Phantom Theatre. The focus of that company was on original work, and Ms. E. worked as co-artistic director there for 5 years. She describes her point of view as that of a “writer and composer of new work.” A former artist-in-residence in Vermont, she has worked at Concord Academy in Massachusetts as well as at her current school. At her school now for thirteen years, she has created a new piece of theatre in each of them, the last four involving documentary theatre.

Describe the process you undertake with students when working on a play-building project.

Ms. E. describes the work as “very collaborative” with “every step of the way” involving student input. She calls the students “co-creators” of the pieces. Initially the students brainstorm a theme; many ideas are proposed and eventually one emerges as the logical choice. The first

production looked at the students' local community from a number of different perspectives; another told personal stories of events gone awry; another addressed the question: "What is happiness?"

Once a theme has been established, the students come up with types of people to be interviewed based on the theme. For example, Ms. E. said for the piece about perspectives on the students' home county, students thought of interviewing a local congresswoman and a federal prison psychologist located at a nearby federal prison. They also brainstorm and decide upon a common set of questions which must be asked.

Along the way Ms. E. conducts lessons in interviewing techniques and listening skills. Students conduct the interviews utilizing the common questions and generating spontaneous follow-up ones during the interview. The interviews are limited to an hour in length. The students record the interviewees and take detailed notes about things like gestures. Transcribing is an arduous, detail-oriented task. Ms. E. says she "really has them (her students) transcribe like Anna Deavere Smith", including pauses, length of pauses, "every '*and*' and '*er*'". The recordings are only audio. Ms. E. describes her goals for the students:

I want it to be a portrait. I want it to be subjective. I want it to be about your (the student's) experience before this person. It's not an imitation. It's how did I receive this person in this encounter. I want them to really listen. I always tell them pretend that your tape is broken.

Ms. E describes the transcriptions as art in and of itself, saying the best ones have all the power and subtlety of "musical pieces."

After the transcription process is complete, Ms. E. edits them into a single script, cutting and pasting them. She does this in order to provide an objective perspective on the work as a whole. Different interviews are inter-spliced, with perspectives sometimes aligning and sometimes standing in opposition. One of the most valuable aspects of the work she has done with the students is the inviting of the interviewees to the performances themselves.

My research addresses the issues of relevance, engagement and empathy in this kind of theatre work. What has your work revealed to you about student participation in these areas and what would you foresee as being keys to a successful project in terms of increasing student engagement and empathy?

Ms. E. shared complete enthusiasm for this type of theatre work. She noted that in particular the degree and kind of empathy experienced by actor and audience member alike is unique:

When you're watching someone portray their subject, you're also seeing the person—you're seeing the interviewer and the interviewee at the same time, and sometimes you're reminded of that, like when the person interviewed uses the student's name. ..It's just a beautiful moment where you see the young person portraying another person, and yet you see the young person also being addressed... You see a visual image of the empathy. You're reminded that this person is stepping into this other person's shoes in a real concrete way. You kind of go back and forth a little between the illusion of the transformation and all of a sudden being reminded, 'Oh, yeah, this person was actually not the interviewee, this is the interviewer. And also the audience member becomes like the interviewer because it's all direct address to the audience. So I tell the students pretend like the person in the audience is you as the interviewer. Say it to the audience member as if they are you being the interviewer. How did that person make you feel in that moment and try to make that person feel that too. Rather than doing an imitation.

She described the interview process as bringing the student and interviewee together, “They start out in just such different worlds, so removed.” However, as the interview progresses, “They come together through the process.”

Ms. E. said that the student’s approach to the interview and interviewee is important:

One of the keys of the interview technique is to be completely without judgment to make yourself completely open—that you’re never judging the person, or having your agenda what you’re going to say...when you bring in your own subjective experience, the repeating of the gestures just doesn’t do.

She also emphasized that at a certain point, it’s vital that the student-performers move beyond mimicry:

I do have this moment with them where I say, ‘And now we’re going to make art. And not just a document.’ So that means that we are going to engage in some exaggeration or distortion or distilling. When you cut the transcript up, it’s not just a document anymore. I have this piece I give them from Matisse where he talks about portraits and how to make them. He says, ‘Exactitude is not truth.’ He has these four self-portraits, and he says, ‘Look how they’re all completely different. The lines are all completely different, but there’s some essence that each of them has that you say that’s absolutely Matisse, even though the lines are different...Just a bare repetition of the facts is not really getting to the truth, that person’s truth. So in your service of telling that person’s truth then we’re going to edit—when we distill it down to these things we can really hear that truth. We’re not just rolling film.

What benefits and challenges do you see for this type of theatre work with students?

Ms. E. said one common stumbling block in the production process comes when the edited scripts are handed out. Students are often wedded to their interview. She noted that “it can be sobering for them when they get their script” and see that parts of their interviews have been cut.

Overall, she emphasized the positives. She shared that over and over students have commented about the profound depth of experience documentary theatre provides. She says she thinks it springs the opportunity and emphasis on observation and the interview process itself:

One of the things you say as a director is ‘Observe, observe people. And they never do that! They are usually basing their performance on what they’ve seen other performers do, so movie actors, and other stage actors, TV actors. By doing this project it forces them to actually do that...It really expands their vocabulary for what people do.

She noted too that the experience of the interviews was unique and profound, especially with the interaction with young and old:

They are bringing their own experience onto the stage. They fall in love with their subject... They really respect the person and want to do them justice...Students get amazing interviews, and the reason is people are not intimidated talking to a young person. They’re not talking to the press or someone with an agenda...They (the interviewees) seem to be free of those kinds of worries. When they (students) are interviewing an older person, especially, the person is really compelled and wants to pass something on to this young person, their wisdom—there’s an opening...There’s a level of trust that they (the interviewee) don’t have to worry about. People really open to them. And want to...it’s a pleasurable experience to have the interview.

Another benefit Ms. E. cited, related to what she said was an uncommon practice in today’s world—listening:

I just don’t think people listen to each other. I think it’s really rare. You might be 80 years old and no one has actually sat down with you and wanted to hear everything you had to say...for an hour. I think it’s really unique about an interview. It’s all about drawing out the other person and someone actually wants to listen. People just don’t get listened to very much. So I think that’s part of the power of this form. And with a young person there listening to you...You can really see that. They’ll give advice. ‘When you get to be my age...’ There are no downsides to doing this with young people.

Chapter 3 Project Design

Methodology

The study was conducted in a small independent high school of 70 students located in a suburban area in Northern California. Nine students, six girls and three boys, from the theatre program participated in the production and the information gathering process. Additionally, four college-age alumni from another local private high school (the one where this thesis paper's expert interviewee teaches) who participated in documentary theatre at their high school previously were surveyed for their feedback. Two of these students' responses are included in the "Student Outcomes and Reflections" section in their entirety.

Students

Of the nine high school students participating, two were freshmen, five were juniors, and two were seniors. Most of the students, with the exception of the two freshmen and one of the seniors, had participated in the school's theatre productions previously. All had been involved in a school play at some point in their schooling. The college-age students had all participated in theatre at their high school, and all had participated in at least one documentary theatre production while attending.

Procedure

The research project utilized the collection of information from previously published research materials, from new interviews with theatre experts practicing in the field of education and documentary theatre making.

The project began with students viewing different portions of work by Anna Deavere Smith including *Let Me Down Easy*, *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*. They learned about the methods Smith used in order to create her theatre work. After this initial exposure, they were given the opportunity to brainstorm thematic ideas which formed the basis for their own work. They learned how this documentary theatre approach has been done in at least one other high school setting. Once a theme emerged, the students and I identified appropriate interviewees and designed questions. We informed the interviewees of our project and gained their approval for the use of their stories. Eventually, the students selected material to use in the production, and an edited script emerged. Poems from professional writers and quotes from famous personalities provided a framing device for the interwoven interview texts.

I addressed the following broad areas for assessment through specific questions: engagement, relevance, empathy, challenges, and rewards. I interviewed all of the students, my own in a group interview format, the post-high school students via the telephone and questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Once all data were collected, I summarized common themes across discussions in order to depict student responses in the outlined areas. I grouped the responses according to questions asked, and I supported my summaries with quotes from student participants.

Chapter 4 Student Outcomes and Reflections

The following discussion identifies themes and includes supporting data from the interviews and focus groups. Two questionnaires sent out to post-high school students are included in their entirety at the close for review and comparison. My discussion focuses chiefly on the response of my own students.

Participants:

High school students:

What did you find particularly engaging about documentary theatre and was there a highlight?

Students spoke of their enjoyment of and engagement with documentary theatre's interview process. They found their interviewees' stories interesting and life-affirming. One student commented:

I felt the most engaging part of this process was going out and interviewing our specific person. It felt kind of weird just going out to meet this random person who was willing to tell us their story, but I was going with the mindset that I could learn something from this person, and it was just interesting to see how all these people have these different stories, how it's affected their life.

The meaningfulness of playing someone whom they had met was mentioned repeatedly. Another student also cited the value of hearing other peoples' stories saying, "I like listening to peoples' lives and the things that they've learned through failing and succeeding repeatedly."

Several students mentioned the performance itself as a highlight. Receiving recognition for their work, performing for their interviewees, and speaking with them post-show were all

noted. One student spoke of the satisfaction of remembering to do something in performance he had been coached on in rehearsal.

What were some of the challenges?

Challenges noted included the range of age required for one student's part; another mentioned having to play someone of the opposite gender. One student noted that it was most challenging "to play someone entirely unlike yourself and not be(ing) able to joke your way around it." She noted that:

When it's like a made-up character you don't have to worry about if I say something in this tone of voice will they think that I'm insulting them because they don't exist, but when it's actually a real person that you're pretending to be and they're going to come see the play...there's always this worry in the back of your head—if I add this on to make the character have more depth will they think that I'm insulting them? Like if I talk in a funny voice like this, will they think I think they're stupid?

This same student remarked that in general it made her a bit worried and "less willing to mess around with (her) voice." Another student said he struggled most with saying lines he himself didn't agree with, but indicated it did not matter that the lines were from a real person. Most often cited as a challenge was the pressure of having to perform someone who actually existed, especially when that person was in attendance at the performance.

Did you find the play and process particularly relevant or meaningful?

Most all of the students spoke of a way in which the production had relevance to and meaning for their lives. The play's topic (dreams: both aspirational and nocturnal), the play-building process and its performance were all cited as meaningful and relevant. One said:

I definitely found this (the production) totally relevant—or meaningful especially, because I'm heading off to college soon and I'm at that point where I really have

to start thinking about if I want to pursue something that I want to do. And is it something that people will agree with me—or is the purpose just to make money. Do I want to do something because I like it or because I want to make a lot of money? And a lot of these people (characters in the play), for example Marc—I thought it was really inspiring. I could probably look at the world the same way he did...If you really put yourself to it, if you're persistent, it'll work out. And not just Marc, but everybody else. They might have had a rough start (compared) to where they are now but everybody seems to get to some sort of happy place in the end. It kind of brightens my path on how my life will be in the next ten years.

Several students remarked that it was encouraging that the characters as presented shared life-affirming stories with happy outcomes, even though the interviewees had struggled initially. One student noted that the interviewees' attendance had made the project especially meaningful, and questioned as to whether the project would have had the same positive impact without the interviewees' attendance, saying that without the interviewees' attendance, "it would have been just another play, another acting performance." Later, however, she noted that audience members had found her character so fascinating that they had wanted to meet the "real" him—he wasn't in attendance both nights. She noted that this interviewee had even sent her a meaningful email praising the production and her performance. The email read:

I cannot thank you...enough for the opportunity to be a part of this project.

A., you 'captured' me to such perfection I couldn't believe it. As I told you, it was truly like looking in a mirror (which for me has always been pretty scary!...but you made it okay).

More to the point--and I don't know if others had this experience--but I truly left the performance feeling very validated as a human being—'heard' as it were, about who I am and what I am about.

The student who received the email noted, "It was kind of amazing. It made it a lot more important feeling than any other play that I'd been in before because it actually affected people in a way that wouldn't just last for that evening..."

Another student noted too that it was more rewarding, “It wasn’t just, ‘I stood up in front of ‘X’ number of people and did a play, it was ‘I actually did something that will stick with people and had a purpose...’”

Another student echoed these comments, adding: “I liked this play a lot more than any other I’ve been in at my other schools, because it did have a lesson and a purpose it did try to get out to the audience...”

What stood out to you about this kind of play-building process?

Students expressed initial doubts about how well the production would turn out. They had difficulty envisioning the final product. When it was asked by the interviewer if anything could have been done to help them imagine the outcome or alleviate their concerns, no student expressed a solution to the problem. One compared the students’ own work with Anna Deavere Smith’s, “We knew that we had to interview people like Anna Deavere Smith, but we all just interviewed one person, where Anna Deavere Smith goes out for months and months and months and interviewing all these people and in the end picking like thirty people...”

This same student expressed a willingness to stay with the project nonetheless as there seemed to be buy-in by all. He went on to say he appreciated the interviewees’ willingness to share their stories so readily. It helped him remain confident in the work. He said, “Everybody we talked to wanted to tell their story. That’s what really made it great.”

One student cited the interview process as unique and memorable:

It was actually really kind of interesting to be able to go out and meet people, be able to interview them, like try to get to know them as best we can; then try to present them on stage. It was pretty challenging, pretty intimidating, but also a really cool new process. It wasn’t just like, ‘Be a pirate...be funny.’

Another noted that having more of a hand in creating it from start to finish was beneficial. “We started off with nothing. In traditional theatre you’re grounded with the script.”

Another added:

You get the opportunity to interact with your character, which is unlike a fictional character. What really helped me connect more with him was because after the interview there was maybe an hour more of just unrecorded stuff that me and him just talked about for another hour, like personal stuff, and I thought that really connected me more with him, and it wasn’t intentional, I didn’t want to do that just because, it wasn’t like ‘I’ll get more out of him.’ No, it was me and him having one on one conversation like just people that met up. And it made me feel like this responsibility to tell his truth—it made it more important to me.

Several students said that once the script was assembled by the teacher with the various interviews “pieced together...bouncing off each other” it made more sense; several students pointed to this dramaturgical decision as essential to the project’s success. One said, “I liked how you (the teacher) cut it up, so that the pieces all flowed together, almost like one sentence.”

How was preparing for and presenting different than a traditional play production process? Did you feel a different level of empathy? How was it different?

Several students enjoyed the inter-woven nature of the script’s structure. It felt “less mechanical.” One student noted a difference in the length and demands of the project: “With documentary theatre you have to start from the ground up, literally from nothing almost...This idea of documentary theatre makes the process longer, but more meaningful.”

Several students said they did feel a different level of empathy with their characters. One student commented:

I think it forced us to work harder and get better acting because...normally we just put on a funny voice and body language...but when you’re trying to be this specific type of person you have to attach their past to it and there’s the pressure

of showing who they are in a way that won't hurt them or in a way that is true to them. It sort of pushed our boundaries and helped us get better at acting.

She also noted:

At first I kind of didn't like my guy. I thought he was kind of arrogant, but it probably had a lot to do with I was having a hard time transcribing the interview because it was really long, but then you (the teacher) started talking about how it was a real person... (made) me realize it's a real person. It's not another character, it's a real person, so you have to empathize with them and share their truth. When I tried to do that, I ended up not disliking him, and now I really like him. You can't just goof off their character because they're real and because you have to show them who they are, not what your opinion of them is.

Another noted, "It was easier because you based your character off of a real person, and you could know like how they acted and what they said and their gestures, so you didn't have to come up with something out of the blue. It was 'Oh, there's a person; be that person.'"

Another said:

Here when we had a real person, I felt a really strong personal connection with them... After awhile, after so many rehearsals, after learning my lines, it started coming out of me like a natural thing, so there's a better connection with this character somehow only because you interacted with them somehow. And in the traditional characters, or fictional characters, you can't interact with them, you really don't know what they're trying to tell you. It's all on paper, there are no emotions, there's nothing behind it... you don't get the same effect as in meeting this real person. In addition to that with fictional characters you can just not do what the script says, you can change it up, but here we're so limited because we have to stick to the truth... It goes in part with connecting with this person. It felt like it was my story. It wasn't like 'I have to act out this person.' Well, sure, I have to act like an 87 year old man. But the story just felt like it was mine. It felt like I was actually telling my story and the words came out of my mouth like in such a flow that it felt like it was just me coming up with this idea as I was going, like I'm the person that somebody interviewed. And I realized that, I felt that maybe half-way through my part. It felt like kind of a flow, so I relaxed a lot more after that and I felt like I'm telling my story. Nobody knows what I'm going to say... I don't know how to explain it, but it felt like my story, and it was just this amazing feeling.

Yet another said:

Instead of just having to memorize a character we envision—a pirate, a giraffe—we had to actually like...we listened to the audio footage and read the words over and over and realized, ‘Oh, hey, this is a real person, and I kind of have to sort of channel them in a way into this. So it was less just about memorizing lines and a character, and it was more about being a person...kind of turning yourself into that person. That was a major difference.

How did audience experience impact you?

Here too the students cited positive reactions to documentary theatre. One cited the material itself as a strength, at least for adults and mature students. Another appreciated the different perspectives presented. A student followed up on this comment saying that some audience members wanted to meet her interviewee, and know more about him, saying, “A bunch of people came up to me after the show and said, ‘Who’s that guy you’re playing? He sounds so interesting. I want to meet him.’ So it was kind of cool because it connected people with each other instead of just people and characters.” Another student echoed the interest, saying she felt at one point like she wanted to meet other students’ interviewees herself.

Another said:

With a normal play your parents are going to like it even if you suck, so they’re not very good data points, but with this one I noticed that a couple of the kids, the more mature kids really enjoyed it, the adults loved it, and some kids were just bored out of their minds—which makes sense because it’s really something because our subject matter was something that your average kid wouldn’t be able to relate to.

Another added, “I liked it a lot because you get different points of view...I thought the play was meaningful and soulful in that way.”

Another said:

I think it was kind of magical because we had only met the person one time, so it was kind of like since we didn't really know them we had to create almost an intermediate kind of character between them and us, that was like what we thought their true self was. And I think that was cool not *really* knowing them. Because if I was asked to play my mom I could play her really well because I know all of her gestures and how her tone of voice goes, but it was interesting having to work to play someone who we don't know and really just have this one recording of them, this one hour of time, this one picture of them.

Another said:

All of these people didn't have perfectly formed and predictable childhoods and early lives and yet they all turned out OK, so that kind of gives me hope that it's possible to make it through life even if you start out kind of wibbly-wobbly. Like Anna Esther's person did not have a great family and yet she's very happy.

What would you suggest as possibilities for improving the group's documentary theatre process in the future?

One student regarded the process as "perfect" and listed a number of ways in which it worked, including the amount of rehearsal time; another said more rehearsal time would have been helpful. Almost all of the students said more rehearsals with the technical team would have been valuable. The most pervasive concern that was expressed was the lack of play during the rehearsal process, or what this student called "giggle time." The students missed the theatre games and exercises that normally make up a much larger percentage of class time. The idea to do "in character" acting games and exercises was seen as being a fun and helpful addition for the future. One student suggested staying in character in public.

Other suggestions included: interviewing people older than the student actors themselves; tailoring the questions to the interviewees' ages, interests; videotaping the interviews; more games; trusting in the process and the director.

The focus group interview ended with the following exchange:

STUDENT: When you get up close to when the play is going to start or immediately after the play, you sometimes slip into your character, and you'll say something and it's like part of your lines...or you'll be fumbling with your words and you'll fumble the way your character fumbles, and it's just like "Whoa, that wasn't me, that was Mimi (her character)."

OTHER STUDENT: You just did that.

STUDENT: (shrugging) Yeah, I know.

Post-high school students

In addition to conducting the focus group interview with current high school students, four college-age students who had participated in documentary theatre at another local private high school in Marin were contacted for their responses. Two of their questionnaire responses are included here in their entirety for review and comparison.

Post-high school student #1:

Josef, currently enrolled as a junior at Wesleyan University:

Tell me a little bit about your high school documentary theatre experience.

My junior year I performed in *Epiphany*, which A. directed. My friend B. and I interviewed a middle-aged lesbian couple from F. I had been especially interested in interviewing a queer adult as the process of coming out, especially in our rather hetero-centric society, often involves quite a significant personal form of epiphany. The two women were truly wonderful. They told the story of their first meeting together, and then each told a personal story. Both of their stories involved leaving men to whom they had been married.

This semester (junior year at Wesleyan University) I am taking a Solo Performance class, several of the assignments for which have involved using found text and interviews as source material, and as such have been a form of second-hand documentary theater. The one monologue I prepared that seemed the most in this vein consisted of clips from interviews with Marilyn Manson.

What did you find particularly engaging about it? Highlights?

Meeting and speaking with our interviewees was just a fantastic experience because of how friendly, open, and humorous they are. They told great stories and are incredibly entertaining. The wisdom and insights in the life-changing moments they shared with us provided us with more than enough motivation to share their words with others and do them justice as fully as possible. Feeling so honored as a medium for their experiences was the most rewarding aspect of this project.

What were some of the challenges?

Just in terms of preparing the performance, my greatest challenge involved finding my interviewee's voice. Adjusting for the difference in age and gender proved to be quite difficult. Although seemingly a superficial aspect of an acting process, at least psychologically, working at reconciling this physical dissonance helped me greatly in improving and deepening my performance.

How would you compare the experience with the traditional theatre production process?

Having such a rich and concrete source for my 'character' presented a very different kind of process than the act of creating a character essentially from only a script and my imagination. A large chunk of preparation involved listening to the taped interview over and over. Having a partner who had also been present for the interview was quite helpful, as we were able to gauge each other's accuracy in portraying the interviewees. In addition, A. knew them (she had been the one to set us up with them), and so provided an extra eye and ear for evaluating our progress. It was a totally new experience for me to work toward realizing an existing 'character' as truthfully as possible as opposed to crafting a new one. Although quite difficult, it did mean being able to check in and determine exactly what needs to be tweaked or perfected. In terms of dramatic structure and performance preparation (dress rehearsals and tech work), however, the process was pretty similar to work I had done before and have done since.

Did you find it particularly relevant? How so?

In terms of my theatrical education and development, this project served me very well and added a piece to my experience that I strongly value. It widened my

conception of theatrical possibility — especially when it came to distinguishing between the perks and capacities of filmed documentary versus documentary theater. I learned about my ability as a storyteller to share voices and stories in a narrative web that brings those voices into a context in which their value can be shared widely and loudly.

How did the interview process affect/inform your work/you?

One of the aspects of working on this project that has affected me most has been the appreciation of the natural wisdom garnered from a life's experience that exists in the stories of every person in the world, and the value of providing a forum for those to be heard. I have gained an immense appreciation for the finding an awareness of that pure uniqueness in every person I might come across.

How was preparing for and presenting the "character" different than a traditional model for you?

A large portion of the structuring and construction of the piece lay with Annie, who edited all of our transcripts and created the script. I have done similar work for my solo performance course, however. Focusing one's creativity through the words of others creates an interesting and exciting challenge. Much in the same way, I think, that presenting a real person on stage is different from the "traditional model." While seemingly constricting in terms of personal creativity, I have found, and continue to find, that working within these constraints (as is often the case when working through an intentionally limited creative process) allows for a more subtle and focused utilization of one's own imagination.

Did you feel a different level or kind of empathy doing this kind of acting work? How was it different?

Working with nonfiction did bring my level of empathy to a more vivid sense in my creative process. Having met the interview and having heard the story first hand elevated my stakes in the performance, as I had a very real person whose life and character I was tasked with presenting to an audience.

How about audience reactions, feedback?

The two women we interviewed came to one of the performances, which made for one of the most nerve-racking performances I have ever been in. The already elevated stakes I mentioned above shot up even higher, as I was in essence trying to present as accurate (if not photo-realistically, then in meaning and intention — as is one of the differences between the two media) a mirror as possible for this

woman in the audience. They loved the show, though, and were very grateful for what they considered to be quite a gift in the form of our production. One of the most affirming and gratifying experiences I have ever had as a performer was hearing from them a year later that they had purchased the video of the play and regularly showed it when they had friends visiting.

Post-high school student #2:

Rachel earned her BFA in Drama at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 2010. She is pursuing a career as an actress in New York City.

Tell me a little about your high school documentary theatre experience.

In my high school documentary theatre piece I played a woman named Tamar, who was in her 90s, and close to the end of her life. My friend P. played her husband, Naphtalie. In the performance, we played both the older couple and ourselves, interviewing them, and switched back and forth in the scenes.

What did you find particularly engaging about it? Highlights?

I loved being able to meet the character/person I was playing and to really get to know her. Although I was playing a woman very different from myself, I felt a much greater connection to her than to any other characters I have played. I felt such a great need to understand her: her thoughts, her movements, her words.. I had the privilege of having multiple meetings with her, so by the time I played her onstage, I felt ready. I felt like since she was an actual, real person, that everything I did while playing her was real, like she was alive inside of me while I was performing.

What were some of the challenges?

It was a challenge as well because you feel a great responsibility to this person: to portray them in the most accurate way possible while still making art that people will want to watch. There were sometimes where I found myself wanting to be truthful to the person I was playing, but it would have greatly sacrificed the entertainment value for the audiences, so occasionally I found myself having to make small sacrifices: like to speak slightly louder and clearer so that people could hear/understand the words... in the end, I would like to think that I still remained truthful to her character despite minor adjustments needed for the sake of the performance.

Of course, transcribing was also a great challenge, especially because I interviewed an elderly couple and there was so much talking over each other and

mumbling, sometimes even words spoken in other languages. It was definitely hard work to figure out what everyone said when, and make sure we were creating an accurate script.

Did you find it particularly relevant? How so?

The performance and character were incredibly relevant for me. At the time I was 18 years old and studying a woman at the end of her life. I was just about to end a big chapter of my life as well: to leave the life I had always known in Marin and to move across the country for college where I knew no one, and to start a new life in the city of New York. I knew that life as I had always known it was coming to a close for me, and for Tamar as well, and neither of us knew what to expect from whatever was to come. I interviewed Tamar about happiness: what it means to her, whether she is or is not happy. She told me that ‘happiness is to belong to someone’ (which she did) and I realized how right she is: that all any of us want is to be loved and to belong (what high school girl/human being cannot relate to that?)

How did the interview process affect/inform your work/you?

Being able to actually meet the character I was playing made the process of playing that person real for me. Since then, I have used this in my acting: if I cannot actually meet the person I am playing in real life, I like to meet them in my imagination. I talk to them and study them, get to know them, just as I did with Tamar. I have learned the great value in studying the person you are playing down to the most minute details: the way she rests her hand on the kitchen table, the way her eyes glance across the room, the way her voice rises and falls. Being able to interview and learn all these details is incredibly important when building a character, so if I cannot do it in person I must use my imagination or other means.

What stood out to you about this kind of playbuilding process? How, and why?

I was surprised at how much more real everything became during the process of the play. I had thought that I might fixate on the differences between what we were trying to replicate and the actual thing, but instead I found that once I had done my work on learning my person/character, everything else sunk into place. I was not focused on the differences between what we were creating and what really existed, but felt like I was living in the world of the two realities combined.

How was preparing for and presenting the "character" different than a traditional model for you?

Preparing the character of Tamar was certainly harder work than the traditional model, but the hard work yielded much greater results. Yes, there was so much more for me to draw from than on the pages of a script: I had a real, live, breathing human being whom I was becoming in every way I possibly could. There were so many tiny subtleties to pick up and make my own. Yet with all this hard work came amazing results. I did not need to "memorize the lines" because I *was there* when she said them. I had been in the room to experience them, and her, as well. Yes, it was much harder work but when all that work was put in, it made for a much richer character than I had ever created. I believe this is why so many Oscars go to actors who play real people: Daniel Day Lewis this year for Lincoln, Meryl last year for Margaret Thatcher: when we have a real person to emulate it becomes much more work, but there is potential for such rich performances.

Did you feel a different level or kind of empathy doing this kind of acting work? How was it different?

I certainly felt a different level of empathy doing this type of work. Typically when a play ends, it can feel like a death. In this case, the person I was playing, Tamar, was near death, but was still alive after the play was over, so I felt like she was still alive within me as well. When the play ended, I did not have to say good-bye to her cause she was still there. I was very happy for this. I went back and visited her several times, and always took such delight in our meetings. Never before had I been able to go back to a character I had played and hang out with her, after the play was finished! I will say I treasured these last few meetings greatly. I then came back to visit her a few months after I had moved to New York, but she was very sick then, and I did not get to see her. I took comfort in being back at her house and seeing her husband, Naphtalie, and I had a feeling that would be my last visit there. She passed away shortly after.

How about audience reactions, feedback?

I certainly felt that level of empathy in me while I was playing Tamar onstage, and it was clear the audience felt it too. I'll never forget my brother, who always complained about my shows, coming up to me after the performance. He looked at me, and I was sure he was going to insult me in some way, but instead he broke into tears. He was sobbing about how Tamar (whom I was playing) 'wanted a diamond' but that she 'could not see' and that 'all she really wants is to be able to see again, like other people do'...this is one of the only times I have ever seen my brother cry, and I still cannot believe my performance had such a deep effect on him.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, student response to documentary theatre participation in a high school setting was overwhelmingly positive. While students experienced uncertainty and skepticism in working with an unfamiliar form at first, the enjoyment of the interview process itself and the eventual edited version of their transcriptions into a script gave them increased confidence.

In summary:

1. *Students stated that the project felt very relevant and meaningful.* Reasons cited

included:

- Having a say in the topic chosen
- Creating a theatre piece from scratch
- Conducting interviews with interesting people
- Positive audience responses to the material all
- Learning from a real person
- Playing someone they met and interviewed, spent good deal of time with
- Their real “characters” were in the audience
- The topic was interesting and they felt connected to it
- The performance actually affected people’s thinking longer-term
- The play had an intellectual purpose

2. *Students felt empathy with their characters.* Reasons cited included:

- The opportunity to interact with their character

- The students having to do their characters/interviewees' lives justice
- The opportunity to observe their characters in real life
- The requirement to recognize and work in their characters/interviewees' pasts
- The opportunity to observe their characters/interviewees
- The opportunity to repeatedly listen to their characters/interviewees interview audio recording
- That the students took notes
- That they created an intermediate connection between themselves and their characters/interviewees

3. *The students reported strong engagement with the project.* Reasons cited included:

- The personal nature of the interview process
- The interesting, life-affirming stories their interviewees shared
- The learning that took place from the interviewees' stories
- The many different perspectives presented
- The presence of the interviewees in attendance at the performances

4. *The interviewees reported strong satisfaction with both the interview process and the performance itself*

Comparison of Findings with Previous Research

I did not find any research specific to documentary theatre and student involvement. The most relevant research I found regarded the use of play-building. It noted mixed responses in terms of engagement and relevance. My research revealed overwhelmingly positive responses to the play-building process, specifically documentary theatre.

Limitations of the Study

Research limitations included the small number of participants and a significant range of student profiles in terms of experience and abilities. The students also know the instructor and perhaps were reluctant to speak negatively when interviewed about the process and its effects.

Implications for Future Research

Even within the small geographical range in which this study was conducted there were several schools producing this kind of theatre work. There is anecdotal evidence that this type of theatre can have a positive effect on student engagement and on making connections and building empathy. It suggests further documenting and disseminating this information to theatre educators. The strong number of positive responses and the large number of students who cited the interview process itself suggest that even just this interview practice alone may be worth utilizing as a learning tool for students. A high degree of relevance, engagement and empathy came about simply from that part of the process.

About the Author

The author has been teaching theatre in secondary settings for over twenty years, often utilizing play-building as a means to increase engagement and ownership of the work. His student productions have often featured student writing, at times including personal references and stories from and about school members themselves. Alumni and teachers have also appeared on stage with current students in these productions, often times playing themselves. The author currently teaches both English and drama at a Northern California independent high school.

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