

Shakespearean Process Guided by Feminist Ideals: The Drive of Presence with an Engine of Collaboration

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore how Feminist ideals simultaneously guide and emerge from Shakespearean theatrical process through my observations of the actors' experiences in our production of William Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*. I produced this play adhering to traditions of 17th century English theatre. Within those constraints and that of the text, I found that the presence and collaboration necessary to produce Shakespeare was strengthened and sustained through the Feminist ideals of listening, vulnerability, love, play, pleasure, and curiosity.

Keywords

Theatre Arts Performance, Shakespeare, Feminism, Presence, Collaboration, Process

Introduction

The last thesis I wrote culminating a chapter of my formal education was almost three years ago, during my senior year of high school. I set out to answer the question “Who Am I?”, only to discover that the answer could not be neatly defined, for “who I am” is infinitely emerging. My experience-based research taught me then, that I only exist fully within a single moment; that “who I am” is ever-changing as I evolve, constantly affected in any one distinct moment, transitioning into the next. With that introspective research in mind, I came to study at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz with one simple yet challenging goal: I wanted to live vulnerably in my evolution both on and off the stage. With a profound sense of gratitude and an open heart, I can confidently say that I have achieved my goal. This Fall 2018 semester marks my last studying at SUNY New Paltz, and while I have only spent a total of five here, I feel I am equipped to tackle any of the surprises life may throw my way next. This journey has ignited the discovery of my next goal: to heal the world through vulnerability. As a Theatre Arts Performance major, particularly attentive to the wonders of movement, and a Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies minor, this goal holds a special place for me in theatre and feminism alike. I believe theatre is a vital tool that plucks us from the familiar comfort of emotional barriers. Generating theatre is like a muscle with exponential growth potential strengthened by the constant practice of love and curiosity that the feminism platform provides. By returning to Shakespearean process and enlisting the art of collaboration, I set out to prove this connection between theatre and feminism. With Miranda Cooper as director, Sarah Foster as stage manager, a passionate group of 11 actors, and myself as artistic director and producer, we

realized the significance of a conscious collaboration with moment to moment evolution in our production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Background: Shakespeare, Presence, Listening, Vulnerability, Love and Play

The spectacle of theatre familiar to most Americans today would knock Shakespeare right out of the park (pun indeed intended). 17th century English theatre consisted of minimal sets, relying greatly on the imagery of the text to ignite audience imagination. Lighting was decided by the sun's azimuth and plays were written in process with the actors. And the greatest difference of all? The scripts. Actors were given what was called a "role" which had only their specific lines along with cue words written down. Likewise, our SUNY New Paltz actors were given customized scripts consisting of only the pages on which each respective actor had lines. As such, they could only see the story evolve during the rehearsal process. To produce a play in which the actors are only given fragments of their script, a carefully considered and diligent practice of presence is essential. In order to practice presence, one must live vulnerably, lovingly and playfully, with listening ears, hearts and minds. In this *Background* section, I will examine the practice of presence and its intrinsic connection to vulnerability, listening, love and play. Later, under the section labeled *Process*, I will illustrate the integral relationship between an actor's presence and Shakespeare, referring to observations made throughout our journey towards a fully considered production *The Tempest*.

Presence, Vulnerability, and Listening

To dissect the life force that is presence, I must refer to Patsy Rodenburg in her book, *The Second Circle*. Rodenburg places this energy within what she calls the "Second Circle." She believes we, as humans, flow through First, Second, and Third Circle energies. For the purposes

of this paper, I will only be discussing the Second Circle because it is home to our presence. Rodenburg describes experiences within the Second Circle as “the moments when your energy fully connected you to the world and you received energy back from that connection” (3). To fully connect with ourselves and the world around, we must engage each “aspect of presence: posture, breathe, voice, sensory awareness, listening, clear thinking, generosity of the heart, and sheer bravery” (Rodenburg, xvii). Each of these aspects can only be accessed when one is vulnerable, open to the unknown. To be vulnerable is to surrender one’s ego to their heart. It requires true listening, free from judgement and full of curiosity; to be comfortable in not knowing. Listening is about understanding rather than responding; it is an exchange of energies: “We all give our energy and by listening we all receive energy. Give and take” (Rodenburg, xiv). Presence is a “give and take,” a practice hugely required in theatre-making, of which I will discuss further in subsection, *Rehearsal*. Presence demands sustained mental effort, thus exacting a healthy mind and body. Vulnerability and listening cultivate the curiosity necessary to sustain presence.

Love and Play

“Presence thrives amid unconditional love and joy” (Rodenburg, xiv). While vulnerability and listening generate curiosity, both tools are hardly accessible without love. As human beings, love fuels us and joy provides the space desired for love to flourish. For the purpose of this paper, I consider joy and play to be one and the same. Two feminist writers and activists, whose work I hold dearly to my heart, have lead me through the maze of love and play, grounding the ambiguity of these engines in personal experience. These women are María Lugones in her essay, *Playfulness, “World”-Traveling, and Loving Perception*, and adrienne

maree brown in her book, *Emergent Strategy*. While brown considers love as “an energy of possibility,” Lugones defines play as “an openness to surprise” (Brown: 32, Lugones: 16). Love is the energy that wants to listen, to learn. brown writes about how “love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion” (9). Love is the opposite of fear. It is what emerges when we transform our fears into falling, buoyed by the pliancy of play. Love lets us fall into observation free from any fears of judgemental hesitation while play engineers our creative motivation; this is collaboration.

Creative Constraints: Timeline and Rehearsal Schedules

Love and play cultivate the space necessary for creative collaboration. For insight into the process of collaboration, brown refers to the resilience of mushrooms and dandelions, observing how “they evolve while maintaining core practices that ensure their survival” (9). This is the resilience of theatre as well. We must maintain a structured schedule to ensure the completion of our project while realizing the creative possibilities offered by the constraints of the text. With this image considered, below I have detailed the timeline and rehearsal schedules to which we adhered during our creative process.

Timeline

Nov. 27	Dec. 2	Dec. 4	Dec. 13	Dec. 14	Dec. 15
Production Meeting 3:00 pm CT 108	Auditions 3:00-5:00 pm SUB 460	Cast Meeting 5:00 pm CT 108	Rehearsal 6:30-10:30 SUB 62/63	Rehearsal 6:30-10:30 SUB 62/63	Rehearsal 12:00-5:30 Performance 7:30-9:30 SUB 62/63

December 13, Rehearsal:

December 14, Rehearsal:

SUB RM 62/63		SUB RM 62/63	
6:30pm	Warm Up	6:30pm	Warm Up
7:00pm	BREAK	7:00pm	BREAK
7:05pm	Improv Run	7:05pm	Blocking
8:25pm	BREAK	8:25pm	BREAK
8:35pm	Work Act I	8:35pm	Cont. Blocking
9:55pm	BREAK	9:55pm	BREAK
10:05pm	Cont. Work Act I	10:05pm	Cont. Blocking
10:30pm	End of Day	10:30pm	End of Day

December 15, Rehearsal & Performance:

SUB RM 62/63	
12:00pm	Blocking
12:55pm	BREAK
1:00pm	Cont. Blocking
1:55pm	BREAK
2:00pm	Cont. Blocking
3:20pm	BREAK
3:30pm	Full Run
4:50pm	BREAK
5:00pm	Cont. Full Run
5:30pm	DINNER BREAK
6:30pm	CALL
7:30pm	Start of Show

Process: Casting, Production, Rehearsal, and Performance

After a fiercely vulnerable Meisner workshop a few months ago, I learned that my peers were eager to participate in theatre projects, but lacked opportunity. As feminism has instilled in me a magnetic generosity, I recognized I had an opportunity and a responsibility. Sara Ahmed illustrates this practice in her beautifully accessible book, *Living a Feminist Life*, exploring feminism “as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility give us responsibility: to take care” (17). With a thesis that needed executing, I considered it my responsibility to satisfy my peers’ artistic craving. Inspired by Shakespearean process and the unique techniques essential within the process of performing one of Shakespeare’s plays, I chose to produce *The Tempest*. Consisting of three (one could even argue four) plot lines and 12 different characters, the possibility of executing this project alone was undoubtedly impossible. Thankfully, theatre is not a rare passion at SUNY New Paltz. After learning about my concept, Miranda Cooper quickly contacted me about her interest to direct and Sarah Foster generously offered her time and experience to manage the production. It was each of our debuts working in our respective positions and almost all of our (the actors and myself very much included) first times working on a complete Shakespeare play. We had 15 auditioners and 11 roles to fill. I played Boatswin, a character who (in this version of the play), after the first scene, is lost at sea for the remainder of the performance never to be seen again. I chose this role for myself with specific motivations in mind, of which I will briefly examine in the subsection below and revisit when exploring the *Rehearsal* and *Performance* process. Molding a performance can take on several different shapes dependent upon a scale of factors, from the specific needs of the respective participants to the technical logistics and all of the artistic

ambiguity in between. While our process was generally fluid, our focus followed a loose path beginning with casting, then production meetings, rehearsals and, finally, the performance. With distinctive goals loosely assigned to each phase, the drive of presence and the engine of collaboration were integral to reach every destination along the path towards the realization of our collective creative vision.

Casting

Casting is an emergent puzzle requiring skills I have developed through the sinuous connections both observed and learned from my movement and feminist studies. I relate the casting and production process very closely to adrienne maree brown's activist work. Called "emergent strategy," her activism is an "adaptive, relational way of being" (2). With this concept in mind, we casted one actor as a base around which to determine the remaining roles composing of our ensemble. Adapting to the relationships defined by Shakespeare's text with a keen sense of listening for what each individual actor could bring to a role, the final cast list was decided unto us just as much as it was determined by us. Specifically, choosing to cast myself as a the first character called to save the sinking ship in the beginning moments of the play, my intention was to act as a guide for the audience and cast alike; I will expand this purpose further in the following subsections. Additionally, In an effort to exercise my power for the benefit of my peers, I was swayed by feminism in more ways than one during the casting process. In her book, Ahmed lists examples of how one may live a feminist life; one of those lessons continues to live in me: "how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems" (1). Almost every actor casted in our production had never been afforded the opportunity to perform in a full length play at SUNY New Paltz. These are my peers; I know

their capabilities and recognize their potential. As such, it is my responsibility, as a feminist, to support their goals. Most every person casted had a dwindling fire in them that simply needed a gust of wind to inspire their fervent flames, and our shipwreck became their igniting source.

Rodenburg teaches that, in Second Circle, “you influence [others] by allowing them to influence you” (20). This entire thesis was influenced by the very people I casted before they even auditioned. We were working from a place of presence before the work even began, and by sustaining that drive, we were afforded a highly collaborative cast with open ears and unmasked hearts.

Production

The Tempest begins on a boat at sea during a violent storm; every scene thereafter takes place on a nearby barren island. This blustering setting presented a challenge: How could we portray a shipwreck and island-traveling with no stage or technology, in a conference room located in the heart of the Student Union Building (SUB)? We utilized our imaginations, and with these constraints in place, our creativity flourished. I came to our first rehearsal with sand colored fabric and blankets to scrunch under the material, creating a sand dune effect, while our stage manager secured four wooden crates to use as moving set pieces. A few minutes into blocking the first scene, we realized the fabric and blankets were simply not working. Without any hesitation, we adapted; surrendering to the process, we nixed the materials and worked solely with the wooden crates. If an idea was not working as intended, we transformed that failure into growth, the way feminists have evolved for centuries. Emergent strategy and theatre are one in the same: “Nothing is wasted, or a failure. Emergence is a system that makes use of everything in the iterative process” (brown, 14). Presence is a tool at play here as well. In order

to be open to change, we have to live within the Second Circle for “presence is constantly undergoing a process of transformation” and, as theater artists, we must be open to that inevitable evolution or remain stuck outside of the Second Circle and frozen in the confusion and frustration that was never afforded the freedom to transform into curiosity (Rodenburg, 25).

Rehearsal

Once you learn the simple direction embedded within the punctuation and grammar of the text, the intimidation generally associated with tackling Shakespeare tends to fade into the background as play and curiosity emerge front and center. It is significant to note that this intimidation tends to be directly associated with a fear of the unknown which can only confirm a fear of vulnerability. We challenged a group of inexperienced theatre artists, ourselves included, to investigate a collective unknown, to dive into the surprise waiting just beyond the horizon of a clear comprehension of Shakespeare’s language. A week and a half before our first rehearsal, I conducted a meeting with the cast where I distributed paperwork that clearly outlined the specific textual direction planted within their scripts. I made my expectations clear: that they would each come into the first rehearsal with their respective lines beautifully understood so we could spend every minute of our short time together in an active state of play.

The rehearsal process was necessary for blocking each scene and connecting the actors’ condensed scripts with their missing pieces. Each unearthed connection introduced a sense of pleasure into the room. With highly fragmented scripts in hand, the actors had nothing to lose and everything to discover. Rodenburg writes “Your presence is manifested throughout your body, breathe, voice, words, mind, heart, and spirit” (34). Shakespeare’s language demands the critical use every aspect of ourselves mentioned in this quote; one must take a breathe after every

finite punctuation, alter their voice, enunciate and place great significance on the words, engage with their heart, and free their spirit. Every form of acting should involve an actor's presence, but it is only in certain plays like that of Shakespeare where presence surpasses the realm of "should" and is firmly placed in the impenetrable category of "must." And it's not as scary as it sounds! The beauty of this condition is its natural evolution simply guided by the text.

To direct one of Shakespeare's plays, one must not only have an understanding of the text, but an ease and a willingness to dive into the unknown when the moment strikes, which it inevitably will. It is a challenging role that Miranda Cooper gracefully and playfully executed. She was ready to answer any questions the actors tossed her way from pronunciations to character development. After our first read through, we were ready to get on our feet and begin blocking scene one. As an actor in this scene, I placed my artistic director and producer caps in my back pocket and followed Miranda's intelligent direction. One motivation behind myself playing the role of Boatswain, was an aim to establish an energetic resonance for our cast to aspire to surpass from the very start. There's no way to know if it was my bold presence, introduced during the first moment of the play, that inspired the cast's sustained presence throughout; but I do know that for the remainder of the rehearsal process and especially during the performance, the cast beautifully breathed life into Shakespeare's words, utilizing their own unique powers of presence.

After scene one was fully blocked, I placed my two imaginary hats of power back on my head and turned my listening skills as high as humanly possible. I observed as Miranda directed the cast, discerning her vision as each scene evolved. The only moments I shared my thoughts during our short time with the actors were when I sensed her vision was having trouble

communicating itself clearly. I began whispering solutions to her as hurdles developed which evolved into uninhibited suggestions of simple and sensible directions, for there was not a single idea upon which Miranda and I could not agree. We had a keen sense of one another and the way in which we work as well as our artistic goals. With each other and the process in mind, Miranda and I engaged in a beautiful dance of “give and take” as our version of *The Tempest* emerged. brown writes “That give and take creates room for micro-hierarchies in a collaborative environment” (9). The solidarity of feminism is often confused with egalitarianism, yet it is not unity for which we strive, but a loving agreement to “give and take.” This is a quality embraced by successful theater artists and feminists alike, requiring skills in communication and observation, easily accessible through the Second Circle energy of presence. We began the rehearsal process with a leap into the unknown and stayed afloat through a continuous energetic exchange of presence and pleasure propelling us forward, activated by an urgency to collaborate.

Performance

With only three rehearsals prior to the performance, our one run-through was simply an exercise in solving the many kinks that had yet to be ironed out, leaving the cast with one opportunity to really perform. Two hours before show time, Miranda and I shared our many notes with the cast. We then went on a dinner break as we eagerly awaited to see how the actors would play. I introduced myself and the rest of the crew to our full house, gave a brief explanation of my thesis and walked to my place. The characters in the first scene surfaced from within their ship to tend to the storm. Alonso, our master, called out to me, Boatswain; I ran in from the opposite entrance as the rest of the crew and immediately took charge of the sinking ship. After the boat sunk and our crew shipwrecked, Boatswain never returns. He is a peculiar

character that Miranda and I both saw as a potential tool of communication. My role existed as a conduit for the audience, traversing reality into the imaginative circumstances detailed within *The Tempest*. I was the first thread from which to suspend their disbelief paving the way for the many threads to be accepted by the audience's imagination thereafter.

Mainstream American theatre seems to have forgotten the time old theatrical device of suspension of disbelief. We are forgetting the power of our imagination and our simple yet timelessly effective roots. It seems academic feminism is running into a similar wall as well. Feminist theory is taught through complex jargon making the philosophy seemingly inaccessible to the average student. Ahmed addresses this phenomenon writing, "We might need not to eliminate the effort or labor from the writing. Not eliminating the effort or labor becomes an academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere" (13). I fear these lessons have spilled over into our theatrical spaces, rendering playfulness a rarity among popular American theatre. In an effort to dismantle the unimaginative and unrealistic reliance on spectacle, I chose to return to the basics: storytelling with a script in hand, a couple of crates, and whatever lights the conference room in the SUB provides. With this simple set and the actors anticipating a call to places in the hallway, our audience, under general illumination, awaited for the journey to begin.

Each and every cast member surpassed my expectations; I couldn't place one note given that wasn't carefully considered. They had their scripts in hand and a presence that could be felt beyond the walls of that conference room. My buried fears about the scripts getting in the way of the actors' connections between one another and their audience quickly faded as I witnessed a forgotten quality of presence thrive throughout the performance: spatial relationship; "You don't

need to look at them; you can feel and connect with them across space with your Second Circle energy” (Rodenburg, 21). Igniting every sense of their bodies and minds, this distinct ensemble was listening as one. With only fragments of the script provided and just one messy run through, not a single cue was missed. There were some technical difficulties due to my forgetfulness or that of the stage manager, but nothing major and the actors easily adapted because they were ready for surprise, living within the Second Circle.

Actively engaged in play, the actors lived fully in their characters exceeding previous staged readings during the rehearsal process. I find it difficult to be in process when worried about blocking, lines, costumes, etcetera, yet all this worry faded as we entered the unknown, safe within the love oozing out of our audience and the actors’ playful presence. Lugones writes that “Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight” (17). Every actor in our production, regardless of experience, collectively embodied the qualities Lugones highlights. The drunken trio (Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban) are my favorite example; they played around with breath and voice, listening to one another and extending their generosity through their communal jug. I saw pleasure in their eyes as it extended to their bodies and seeped into the hearts of every person in that beautiful ensemble. brown says that “pleasure invites us to move, to open, to grow,” and I definitely observed that invitation, accepted with open arms. With a palpable presence, sensing spatial relationships, a liberated sense of play and a growing atmosphere of pleasure, I was blown away by the collaborative journey on which us 14 young theatre artists had embarked.

Conclusion

Considering in the 17th century the players who brought Shakespeare's words to life could only be men, it is ironic that the culmination of my studies at SUNY New Paltz has brought me to the realization that it is *Shakespearean Process Guided by Feminist Ideals*, which successfully generates the *The Drive of Presence with an Engine of Collaboration*. Rodenburg writes "[Shakespeare] revealed to us that we can only love unconditionally, find intimacy, be equal with each other, use power well, if we are present to each other and the world. Through trauma and loss he guides his characters onto a plane of positive presence" (xii). Shakespeare understood the power of presence and sought to illustrate that value in every play he published. With a leap into the unknown, guided by the structure of his language, Shakespeare takes us to a vulnerable place cushioned by questions of curiosity. Similarly, "To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable" (Ahmed, 2). This approach to life reveals the paths one must take to discover their presence. Questions lie within the heart of curiosity. To be a feminist is to listen with a curious heart, living within the Second Circle. Feminist ideals of love, listening, pleasure and play are hidden messages within Shakespeare's stories that, when critically considered, cultivate a collaborative environment that thrives within the Second Circle. In our rendition of *The Tempest*, the fragmented scripts, four wooden crates, absence of technology, and the "give and take" ignited our imagination as we adapted to the emergent process of presence sustained through an engine of collaboration. Presence and collaboration were treasured tools rendered timeless through Shakespearean process and Feminist evolution alike. This journey revealed to me that with a conscious consideration of the Feminist ideals within Shakespearean process, theatre has the power to heal the world through vulnerability.

Citations:

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