

The Bridge Between Documentary Theatre and Drama Therapy:
Our Asian American Theatre Experiment

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Throughout my undergraduate studies in the Department of Theatre and Dance of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), one of my passionate interests was exploring how theatre can be used as a modality to address issues of diversity, challenge injustice and inspire social change. One particular project was a joint creation of the first Asian American Theatre Festival (AATF) at UCSD in 2006, a tradition that is still going strong today. The idea was sparked from the accumulated disappointments and frustrations a female Chinese Filipino-American MFA acting student experienced in the graduate program, namely invisible racial microaggression and discrimination from the department, especially when it came to unequal casting opportunities. As she and I witnessed a similar dynamic and this same glass-ceiling effect in the undergraduate program as well, we decided to join forces and do something about it. We used the funding and support of her final thesis project and gave birth to an ongoing, celebratory event to create more acting opportunities for Asian American students, to have our voices be heard and our presence felt, and to make an empowering statement to the department. The debut performance was a potpourri of original pieces by cast members, published Asian American plays, and classical scenes featuring roles in which Asian American actors would not normally be cast in. I acted in several pieces, notably Diana Son's *R.A.W. (Raunchy Asian Women) 'Cause I'm a Woman*. The overall production was a great success, stirring up reactions, acknowledgments, support, and change within the department. The baton was passed to me the following year, but little did I know that the festival was going to go further and beyond its initial goals and intentions. I base this paper on my experience as the director of the UCSD 2nd Annual Asian American Theatre Festival in the spring of 2007. My reflection of the production three years later during my graduate studies in drama therapy has taught me how the fields of documentary theatre (a form in which pre-existing material is used as the primary source for the script without alteration of its wording) and drama therapy are both moving the world toward change—on personal and societal levels—through the intentional use of viscerally perspective-inducing and emotionally expanding elements of theatre in the pursuit of awakening consciousness and empathy in dealing with issues of difference and separation.

1. The Climate & Spark At Pre-Genesis

My first few meetings with the cast of fourteen undergraduate Asian American actors were held to collaborate on the upcoming production. This was the same time period as the Virginia Tech shooting (April 16, 2007) and the fifteenth anniversary of the Los Angeles riots (April 29, 1992). I couldn't help but react to these current events and bring them to the table because they were undoubtedly having a strong influence on the dynamic and atmosphere of not only the cast members but the rest of the campus, community, and country. The members agreed. However, even the simple task of proposing the idea or possibilities of working with these racially loaded and tender events raised mixed feelings, disagreement, reluctance, and mostly fear. I realized that the main underlying obstacle was the discomfort around even talking about "it"—any of

it and all of it. Like many members in the room, I was more accustomed to playing the good, model-minority person who never overtly speaks up or challenges (let alone admits to) some of the oppression we've faced as being racial discrimination. Beverly Tatum elaborates on this psychological cost of silence, claiming that "as a society, we pay a price for our silence. Unchallenged personal, cultural, and institutional racism results in the loss of human potential, lowered productivity, and a rising tide of fear and violence in our society" (200). The doubts and hesitancy of the cast unsurprisingly mirrored my inner fear of not being able to do it right. However, Tatum points out that "if we wait for perfection, we will never break the silence. The cycle of racism will continue uninterrupted" (205). I believe that this awareness was what fueled my courage to go ahead and run with it. For the sake of leading a cast of slightly apprehensive, but undeniably enthusiastic, actors, I put on a fearless, all-knowing, "Don't worry, I've got this" director-face when honestly I did not know exactly where I was going. I knew only that it was going to be an adventure, an experiment. This is how the name came about: *Our Asian American Theatre Experiment*.

2. Documentary Theatre: Our Chosen Form

It could not have been a mere coincidence that I was captivated by documentary theatre in my theatre studies around that time. I was both inspired and swept away by Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Company's *The Laramie Project*, and the many works of Anna Deavere Smith. These dramatists were all reacting to social injustice, oppression and violence. They were using a specific theatrical format to address these heavy and complex issues relating to human conflicts. I was intrigued by the way documentary theatre presented a different relationship to reality and controversial events by giving validity to multiple and all points of view. These artists shared the method of creating scripts through a journalistic technique of interviewing real-life people and sharing them through the theatrical art of performance. Gary F. Dawson writes:

When a documentary play works, it does so because it moves the conversation about its subject matter from a state of entropy to a higher level of activation energy and discourse. . . . Considering the necessary hammering on primary source materials needed to compress the matter effectively into an aesthetic whole, documentary playwrights might be referred to as information millwrights, because more than researched, more than written, more than imagined, a documentary play is manufactured. Yet, the stories within their selected, edited and arranged facts stay long. (xii)

This was it—documentary theatre! This was the format and structure I was going to use for our experiment. I showed a film of Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles* for the cast members who were not familiar with documentary theatre. I then asked the cast to think about and come up with hot-button or taboo topics concerning Asian American culture and communities that were absolutely pertinent but never openly talked about. Each actor chose one topic she or he felt most drawn to from an extensive list: immigration, native names and identities, accents and language barriers, assimilation and acculturation, the lies and realities of the American Dream, gender roles, sexuality, LGBTQ issues, domestic and sexual violence, substance abuse, biculturalism, interracial

families, stereotypes or lack of authentic representation in the media, Eurocentric standards of Asian beauty and mental health. In no time, my once-stage-deprived actors suddenly turned into a group of passionate journalists on a mission. We were breaking not just the “fourth wall”, but the walls of the theatre department itself even before the actual performance began, as the cast ventured out into the rest of the campus and community with their digital recorders and cameras in hand.

3. The Creation Process

Each actor personally interviewed several people who had something to say about the chosen topic, ranging from having direct personal experience or a story to tell to third parties who knew absolutely nothing about the issues, from Asians to non-Asians, from school-affiliated members to nonstudents, from locals to foreigners, and from children to elders. The variety of people interviewed was almost inconceivable, but we were especially drawn to those with strongly opposing beliefs and those who could never imagine having their authentic voice and story be heard, let alone performed on stage for an audience. The interviewees were told the basic format, background, and purpose of the production; they were assured of confidentiality and that the recording of their interview would be watched only by the actor who was doing the interviewing and then deleted once the words were transcribed on paper. This promise was important; even I, the director, did not know a single name or view a single recording. The cast and I were all shocked at how much people were willing to share under the veil of anonymity.

From the interviews, the actors were instructed to transcribe every word, nonword, tick, breath, gasp, sigh, noise, silence, and mannerism expressed by their interviewees. Then, while not changing anything that was said, the actors began a careful editing process that consisted of cutting, pasting, arranging, and interweaving the multiple interviews. This created monologues that went back and forth from one interviewee to another, letting two or more (usually clashing) views exist within a single actor. Unlike more traditional acting methods, where the actors may be encouraged to create, interpret, and own their characters, in this documentary theatre performance it was more important to embody, impersonate, and imitate each real-life person as accurately as possible. Most of the one-on-one rehearsal sessions I had with the actors were spent working on their becoming vessels for these opposing characters to exist within themselves. The key was to be nonjudgmental and noninterpretive and avoid overt commentary, no matter how the actors personally thought or felt about the words coming out of their mouths. Our job was simply to present these conflicting voices to the audience and have the spectators do the interpreting. As Dawson states, “Documentary theatre is a difficult art . . . because it makes penetrating demands on its audience . . . because it is dense with information to absorb, assimilate, and clock for reference, instead of passive watching, documentary play requires mental awakesness in a spectator” (xii). Minor challenges required additional attention and fine-tuning when the actors portrayed people who were very unlike themselves or had to assume thick and heavy accents. I wanted to be cautious about the audience not getting the impression that the actors were mocking or making fun of these real-life characters. As the staging and piecing together of all fourteen monologues into one unifying performance approached, my role as the director was very much like what drama therapist Renée Emunah, one of the leading pioneers of the field, describes (1994) as her experience of directing Self-Revelatory Performances: “Outside of the sessions, on my own, I work on

finding ways of strengthening the dramatic connection between scenes, making transitions more smooth, and augmenting the theatrical potency of the play via music, lighting, and slides” (286).

4. The Performance

The performance took place in the Arthur Wagner Theatre space at the UCSD Theatre and Dance Department building, where the stage was permanently structured in a thrust configuration, seating a total of ninety-nine audience members on three sides. In the printed program, the audience was made aware that the contents of the play were actual interviews conducted by the cast, but names and identities were undisclosed. On the bare center stage was a spotlight on a single black chair used by the actors in whatever necessary way according to their piece. All the actors, dressed in black, entered and exited during the blackouts in between each monologue. Keeping with the theme of giving voices to silenced topics, I made mouth coverings from white fabric, on which were written one or two words or a symbol that captured the entire monologue or topic being addressed. For instance, the piece about biracial identity was titled “1+1 = 1,” the piece about sexual assault, rape and incest was titled “No,” the piece about double eyelid cosmetic surgery was titled “2mm,” and the piece about mental health and therapy was titled “Shhh.” After each monologue, a thoughtfully chosen track of music that augmented each piece accordingly faded in as the actors ritualistically reached into their pockets, pulled out the fabric that they tied over their mouths and took a brief moment to stand still silently wearing the title of their piece. After all fourteen monologues were delivered, the stage was cleared. In the closing moment, the entire cast reentered onto the stage one by one, forming a mandala within a mandala facing out toward the audience. Then, as the actors removed the fabric from their mouths, they delivered parts of the quotation (cited in Albert) from Anna Deavere Smith that was divided up into segments:

We don't need a bridge that's monumental. We don't need an aesthetic miracle of a bridge. We need a bridge to take human beings from one side to the other. If we could remember the human touch and remind ourselves of the power of the word, the power of color, the power of song, the power of dance that defies gravity and reminds us of our souls. If we could remember this—remember it—we would all be, I think hopeful. I remain therefore, as ever, a prisoner of hope.

Rather than the traditional curtain call and having actors exiting through the wings, I had them exit toward the audience and out through the entryway of the house with the intention and hope for these voices to be heard and spread out into the world, and not remain stuck within the walls of the theatre space. In *Self-Revelatory Performances*, a method and term coined by Emunah (1994) states that, “The applause is not only for the play, but for the real people who have shared on stage their life struggles and victories” (288). I too believed that it was the stories and voices of the people we interviewed that deserved the applause.

5. The Audience Responds

The performance was open to the general public, and the responses we received from the spectators were more intense than we had imagined or anticipated. For some

audience members, this was a first theatre-going experience, and many exited in tears. Even after the show was over, people did not leave. There was a palpable atmosphere of needing to “talk about it—now.” This was a good indicator that something had shifted, and that the performance was causing a ripple of movement within and among the spectators. People came up to me and the other cast members afterward, wanting to dialogue. Some returned to watch a second showing and brought along friends and family. The following is an excerpt from a recommendation letter written by Nancy Wahlig, MSW LCSW, the director of the UCSD Sexual Assault and Violence Prevention Resource Center:

Attending the performance was an amazing experience for me. I have attended trainings and workshops to increase my cultural sensitivity, which have given me a deeper appreciation of the diverse issues that challenge individuals. However, nothing has been as powerful as *Our Asian American Theatre Experiment*. The actors completely transformed into the people they had interviewed. The tone of voice, the mannerisms, and the words they spoke—the actors were sharing real life with the audience. . . . It was incredible to watch. But, actually, as a member of the audience, we did more than watch. We too became a part of the performance. We were invited and given permission to hear personal experiences... as sensitively and skillfully portrayed by the actors. Given that over half of the student population at UC San Diego identifies themselves as Asian American, it is critical that we support efforts that enhance understanding of the Asian American students’ experience. Utilizing theater to educate about issues that impact our community is an ingenious idea.

6. Post-Performance & Connecting To Drama Therapy

Although, I cannot speak directly for my entire cast of fellow Asian American students of UCSD, the feedback and impression that I received was that this three-month-long process impacted the performers as much or perhaps even more so than the audience. Many members mentioned to me later on how they kept in touch with some of their interviewees, several of whom came to watch the performance and thanked their actor for giving them the opportunity to witness themselves mirrored and portrayed on stage. The most common reaction I received from the cast was that in the beginning they were hoping to create some change for the spectators, but afterward they found *themselves* being transformed by the entire experience. I agreed. The most profound change I saw among the fourteen actors was that we were no longer fitting the good-model-minority criterion as well as we had done before. This transformation and empowerment was through the process of challenging ourselves and others by listening, embodying, and expressing the impact of silence through the theatrical mode which helped diminish some of the discomfort and fear around talking about these otherwise unspeakable topics. Psychodramatist Eva Leveton writes:

Enactments, with their possibility of extending the emotional range of our perceptions, help us to see the humanity in each other. Difference remains but the threat diminishes. . . . The world becomes smaller, a large tribe rather than a crowd of faceless millions (259–60).

Emunah concurs:

Whether applied to individuals, families, groups, communities, or societies, drama therapy implies loosening the ties that bind us and limit our evolution. At the heart of drama therapy is the experience of liberation, expansion, and perspective. The essence of drama therapy is uncovering and integrating dormant aspects of ourselves, enlarging our conception of who we are, and finding our intrinsic connection with others (302).

The use of drama for social change has already begun within the realm of drama therapy and the potential therapeutic qualities of documentary theatre offers connections yet to be made and contribute to the field of drama therapy. As Dawson proposes:

One could say that documentary theatre, a dramatic representation of societal forces using a close reexamination of events, individuals, or situations, is just what our suffering society needs at century's end: a difficult theatre art that somehow releases a healing effect (xii).

In her book *Healing Collective Trauma*, Leveton writes:

Healing, in our terms, means that groups cope more successfully with the problems of difference, war, illness, and natural disaster. It means that individuals learn to appreciate rather than repudiate difference. It means that acute pain is diminished, energy [is] recovered, and new perceptions are gained. The healing process is life-affirming. It instills hope, not through endless discussion or debate, but by creating situations which potentiate communication on many levels—personal, social, political—and nurturing the energetic potential that resides in each group. Engaged in this work, the victims, often silent and depressed, regain their voices and, together with others, learn to be more fully engaged in making their world a better one (260).

I found that some of the basic purpose and intentions of documentary theatre are similar to those of *Healing the Wounds of History* (formerly called *Acts of Reconciliation*), developed by drama therapist Armand Volkas; and *Playback Theatre*, created by Jonathan Fox and his original founding company. I wouldn't be surprised if dramatists of documentary theatre agreed with Volkas's view "that there is a potential perpetrator in all of us and that under certain circumstances every human being has the capacity for dehumanization and cruelty" (147) and that "when members of cultures in conflict listen deeply to each other's stories and hear each other's pain, they begin to care about one another. Their feelings of empathy and friendship become more powerful than the historical imperative to hate one another" (148). Jo Salas' description of *Playback Theatre's* beliefs are congruent with the values of documentary theatre:

Playback Theatre challenges the customary divisions of our society. It is theatre with the power and intention to heal and transform individuals and social groups. . . . People need stories in order to know who we are as individuals and as a society. The stories we tell of ourselves and our world crystallize and

communicate social and personal self-knowledge. . . . Personal stories hold wisdom and beauty for others, including strangers. . . . Witnessing each others' [sic] stories fosters understanding and empathy. . . . All human experience, including extreme suffering, finds meaning when it is communicated in aesthetic form. . . . The connection that arises from sharing personal stories is a counterforce to increasing isolation and alienation (455).

This description captures and defines my experience working with documentary theatre and directing *Our Asian American Theatre Experiment*. Although I had technically produced and directed this performance, it was really the theatrical medium and the stories that did most of the work. This experiment and my current studies in drama therapy are constantly teaching me how the use of theatre and storytelling is one of the most powerful, constructive and healthy ways to cope with and live through human problems.

All human beings suffer from the experience of difference and separation. Drama therapists David Read Johnson and Renée Emunah write in *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy*, that “The pain of oppression, the impact of privilege, and the ways in which unintentional and unconscious racism and intolerance occur must not only be intellectually understood but also felt in the gut” and that “placing strongly-held and often unquestioned ideas into the performative playspace establishes possibilities for flexibility and transformation” (30–31). I believe that what ultimately bridges the gap between these two separate (and perhaps not-so-separate) fields is that both documentary theatre artists and drama therapists are storytellers. All of us are. We are working with stories—the human story, which transforms all the personal experiences of separation into an expansive life state and universal experience of connection to all human beings. As my beloved mentor, storyteller Diana Castle, says:

As storytellers out in the world inspiring others and healing through the work and play of story, it is our mission to bring about wholeness and connection. The human story is the unifying factor. I deeply feel that through story there is always a connection to be found with others. The mission of all story is to illuminate our lives. Story is connection. It's the good medicine. It's the prescribed medicine for tears and laughter. For catharsis. For wholeness. For health.

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