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Suit My Heart: Staging Foster Youth Narratives that Hit Home

Michelle Hayford

University of Dayton, mhayford1@udayton.edu

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Abstract

While devising *Suit My Heart*, I relied upon my training in the ‘three A’s’ of performance studies conceived by my late mentor Dwight Conquergood as “artistry, analysis and activism” (2002: 152). With these ‘three A’s’ in mind, I set out to facilitate a devising process and create an artistic product that would positively serve all communities involved. The quality of the project would be determined not only by the efficacy of the play that we produced in the end, but by the personal growth of my students and the empowerment of our community partners throughout the process. Discovering the reach of my authority and breaking open my own painful family history in order to grow as a Teaching Artist were not original goals for this project, but turned out to be necessary developments.

Disciplines

Acting | Art Education | Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Theatre and Performance Studies

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Suit My Heart: Staging foster youth narratives that hit home

Michelle Hayford

I was introduced to the mentoring nonprofit Footsteps to the Future (Footsteps) when I cast an aspiring young actor in her first-ever role for a local production of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*. Artkeda, a Footsteps mentee, owned the stage after weeks of learning her lines by listening to a recording of the monologue. She overcame her literacy challenges in order to pursue her dream to act.

I had also cast Judi, the Founder and Executive Director of Footsteps, whose rehearsals were largely (and happily) taken over by *unscripted* monologues about 'the girls' she serves with the nonprofit. ('The girls' is a loving term of endearment Footsteps mentors use for the young women in the mentoring program: "It's all about the girls!") Judi founded Footsteps after being asked to donate suitcases to foster youth, whose frequent moves to and from foster homes and youth homes are often accomplished with trash bags. She discovered that many foster youth are underserved by the agencies meant to protect them and often vulnerable to abuse and deprived of education. The Footsteps mission is to empower young women in and aging out of foster care (approaching the age of 18) to safely transition to living independently.

Judi accepted my proposal to partner my theatre students with Footsteps to create an ensemble play at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) based on interview narratives with Footsteps mentors and mentees. Our collective endeavor with the production was to represent and empower the foster youth; *Suit My Heart* (title from mentee Brittany's poem 'My Heart is a Mime') allowed the audience a window into the disenfranchised lives of those entangled in the foster care system.

While devising *Suit My Heart*, I relied upon my training in the 'three A's' of performance studies conceived by my late mentor Dwight Conquergood as "artistry, analysis and activism" (2002: 152). With these 'three A's' in mind, I set out to facilitate a devising process and create an artistic product that would positively serve all communities involved. The quality of the project would be determined not only by the efficacy of the play that we produced in the end, but by the personal growth of my students and the empowerment of our community partners throughout the process.

Discovering the reach of my authority and breaking open my own painful family history in order to grow as a Teaching Artist were not original goals for this project, but turned out to be necessary developments.

‘Artistry’ meets ‘Activism’—getting acquainted and accepted

Judi invited me and my family to the annual Footsteps retreat on Captiva Island as the first step in our collaborative journey. I relished the opportunity to reconnect with Artkeda and be introduced to more of the ‘girls’ and their mentors through a Storytelling Workshop and unplanned “deep hanging out,” the informal “participant observation” mode most conducive to building community (Geertz 2000: 107). If I proved myself trustworthy and delivered a meaningful storytelling workshop, I knew I’d be able to secure interviews. The “deep hanging out” went well, the only exception being the initial odd presence of my husband. He was the only man invited that weekend and upon our arrival his presence was met with palpable discomfort. I was immediately sensitized to the ‘girls’ deep mistrust of men. I sensed then that men were associated with abandonment and abuse due to the girls tragic life experiences and chastised myself for bringing my family with me. But his hands-on caring for our two small children had him quickly welcomed and freed me up to bond with my new community. I was aware that I may have made an unwelcome first impression: an intact heteronormative family with a doting husband, two kids and two dogs (yes, we even brought our dogs!) in the midst of a retreat for young women in or aging out of foster care who had been failed by their families, and many who were struggling to be self-sufficient single parents. I was cautious about being perceived as the “slumming” academic whose project would result in a “custodian’s rip-off” (Conquergood 1985: 5–6).

The Storytelling Workshop began awkwardly due to the cramming of all the participants into the small living room of one of the hotel suites. But after moving furniture and breaking the ice with light-hearted theatre games, randomly selected pairs went off on their own to share one story of “personal triumph” (Rohd 2008). After the allotted time for sharing stories was up, I asked everyone to remember one notable sentence from their partner’s story. They then were directed to create a five-count sequence of movements that represented their partner’s story, and put the two elements

together as a short representation of their partner's story through text and movement. This activity resulted in deep communion between the paired storytellers and resonated with a tearful audience as each pair in turn overcame any performance jitters to show their partner that they were *heard*.

This storytelling workshop demonstrated the power in seeing one's personal story transformed by another and crystallized into a simple yet loaded performance. The take-away was a reaffirmation of the resilience of those present by bearing witness to each other's life stories and collectively celebrating those moments of triumph each saw reflected back to them. The list of names and contact information I received after the workshop filled the front and back of a piece of legal-sized yellow notepad paper. I was relieved that the girls and mentors had perceived me as an artist with purpose who had effectively collapsed 'artistry' and 'activism,' and proven that their lives were worthy subjects of the art we would make together. What I couldn't have anticipated was that I also would be validated by seeing my own story mirrored back to me in our final production.

'Analysis' meets 'Activism'—inspiring action

My next task was to inform the ensemble of FGCU theatre students about our project for the next ten months, and ensure that they continued to build trust with our Footsteps partners. I emphatically told my students that this was not a project to take lightly—many of these young women had been repeatedly let down by people they had trusted, and my students were not to be added to that list under my watch. Fortunately, my insistence on their dedication was unnecessary because my students were an empathetic group that quickly felt the weight of their ethical responsibility to do right by the young women they befriended despite their differences. The student ensemble was multiethnic, co-ed and from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, yet aware of their status as privileged college students. With our attention to the dynamics of race and class (I myself am mixed race and first in my family with a terminal degree), we were attuned to the need to value diversity as the source of productive dialogue.

We were exploring universal themes while generating performance material—family, home, survival, transcendence, forgiveness and love. Many elements from the

students' personal narratives worked their way into the final script. Everyone has a story of family and home, even in the sad case of its absence or destruction. And many of my relatively privileged students could relate to their interviewees' stories of family dysfunction—home and family is an often fraught aspect of our lives regardless of class, race or education. Personal growth, then, was measured by the willingness of my students to share their own struggles at home, be vulnerable with their peers and open their hearts to one another. It was a natural extension to bring this same generosity to the Story Circle events I facilitated at the monthly Monday night Footsteps meetings, borrowing Roadside Theater's Story Circle methodology.

The Story Circles solidified the strong sense of community and reciprocity among the mentors and mentees and my students, who participated fully in answering the prompts. My students' openness allowed the mentors and mentees to feel safe in answering the same questions with equal honesty. Notably, the fact that Artkeda and Florinda, two well-trusted Footsteps girls, were invested in the project as full participants in the cast also lent us credibility. Many of the mentees saw participating in the project as a chance to share a story their way. Some had felt misrepresented by journalists, newspaper articles and television, and saw an opportunity to have their words valued rather than manipulated. Sharing a story for *Suit My Heart* guaranteed a measure of ownership previously denied to them. In fact, the title *Suit My Heart* comes from a line of poetry shared by mentee Brittney, who acknowledges in the poem that love would "suit my heart" better than hate.

I also participated in the Story Circles I facilitated, but when it came time to transcribe, I skipped over my own narratives and deemed it solipsistic to listen to my own voice on the recorder, let alone consider my narratives for inclusion in our script. But I came to understand that my vulnerability as a Teaching Artist should not be mistaken for narcissism. After all, my own family history informs my activism and interest in working with foster youth in the first place. If, as Jan Cohen-Cruz argues, "[a]rtists must be as sensitive to their differences from community participants as to the common ground they share," (2005: 95), what is lost when Teaching Artists refuse to include their "common ground" as fodder for the project? My epiphany that I was valuing difference and acknowledging privilege to the exclusion of personal investment and risk had me rethink

the editing out of my narratives and recognize that their inclusion came from a desire for reciprocity, not self-indulgence. Stepping away from the role of Teaching Artist as merely a privileged interpreter and instead democratizing disclosure greatly enhanced the quality of our process.

‘Artistry, Activism and Analysis’—appreciating ethics

My worst failure as a Teaching Artist occurred when I didn’t listen to my gut and allowed a local reporter to interview Artkeda alone in my office while I conducted rehearsal. I repressed my mistrust of him, and afterwards Artkeda admitted that she felt cornered into answering questions about her family’s past and only spoke out of loyalty to me. I felt the painful privilege of authority as I recognized that I had failed to protect her from this journalist’s predatory interview. I confronted the reporter, interrupting his interview with another cast member. I appealed to his conscience and asked that he not print Artkeda’s family history, to which he said his only concern was “to get the story.” I told him his methods were unethical and he cut me off, saying, “I don’t need a lecture from a college professor about how to do my job,” and left. I got the editor on the phone to complain about his behavior and to ensure the publication did not print Artkeda’s interview. But the damage was done; I had exploited Artkeda’s trust after so painstakingly building it, and while she accepted my teary apology, I kicked myself for not listening to my intuition. I discovered the necessity of playing gatekeeper to vulnerable community partners who grant me more authority than I recognized. I learned my authority as a Teaching Artist is a privilege and a gift, but can quickly become a curse if it is underestimated. The irony of having trained an entire cast in the ethics of interviewing, only to be undermined in my own office by an insensitive reporter was not lost on the ensemble. We felt the sanctity of our safe space had been, at once, soiled and strengthened. The ensemble’s generous forgiveness for my mistake allowed us to move forward in solidarity and with a greater appreciation for our shared ethics of loyalty and trust.

When I delivered the final script, the ensemble found that I had taken their cue and had contributed my own personal narratives with the inclusion of scenes that dramatized conversations between me and my brother as we came to terms with our

separation during childhood and the traumas that prompted it. This modeling of vulnerability gave my students the opportunity to bear witness to my story as I had borne witness to theirs, further cementing the family our ensemble had become. I had realized the hypocrisy in asking my students and our Footsteps collaborators to crack open their home lives without doing the same. Although we had ensured anonymity by removing identifying information and creating composite narratives, the act of sharing demanded courage. To feel the unease shared by my cast and Footsteps collaborators inherent in making family secrets public was an incredible learning opportunity for me. To agonize firsthand with the fraught ethics of navigating the individual's right to share family history by way of reclaiming, reframing and healing the past was instructive of what a reciprocal applied theatre project *should* feel like. Rather than rest in the comfort of writing off self-reflexivity as undermining of my authority and merely egotistic, I risked the same discomforts of feeling exposed, disloyal and conflicted, with the result that my cast and Footsteps collaborators recognized the emotional resonance of their stories and entrusted me as the 'head' of our newly configured family.

Suit My Heart inspired us to share that which is not politely discussed—the shortcomings and intimacies in our homes, the awe we have for one another's strength to transcend and thrive, and the love we find with the families we choose. Perhaps the synchronicity of Conquergood's 'three A's' is best epitomized, fittingly, by another story of personal triumph. After the successful run of *Suit My Heart* at FGCU, Artkeda was thrilled to tour as part of the cast to the Community-University Expo in Canada to perform *Suit My Heart* as an example of best practices in applied theatre. She boarded her first flight, left the country for the first time, and upon descending the escalator in the airport in Canada, Artkeda declared, "I am proud of myself." This moment reminded me that Artkeda's accomplishment was shared by the entire ensemble for whom 'artistry, analysis and activism' had hit home.