

The Shared Breath Project: Inhabiting Each Other's Words and Being

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Abstract : With the Theatre Season of 2020-2021 cancelled due to COVID-19 at Purdue University, Fort Wayne, IN, USA, faculty directors found themselves scrambling to create theatre production opportunities for their students in the Department of Theatre. Redman, Chair of the Department, found her community to be suffering from anxieties brought on by a confluence of issues: the global-scale Covid-19 Pandemic, the United States' Black Lives Matter protests erupting in cities all across the country and the coming Presidential election, arguably the most important and most contentious in the country's history. Redman wanted to give her students the opportunity to speak not only on these issues but also to be able to record who they were at this time in their personal lives, as well as in this broad socio-political context. She also wanted to invite them into an experience of feeling empathy, too, at a time when empathy in this world seems to be sorely lacking. Returning to a mode of Devising Theatre she had used with community groups in the past, in which storytelling and re-enactment of participants' life events combined with oral history documentation practices, Redman planned The Shared Breath Project. The process involved three months of workshops, in which participants alternated between theatre exercises and oral history collection and documentation activities as a way of generating original material for a theatre production. The goal of the first half of the project was for each participant to produce a solo piece in the form of a monologue after many generations of potential material born out of games, improvisations, interviews and the like. Along the way, many film and audio clips recorded the process of each person's written documentation—documentation prepared by the subject him or herself but also by others in the group assigned to listen, watch and record. Then, in the second half of the project—and only once each participant had taken their own contributions from raw improvisatory self-presentations and through the stages of composition and performative polish, participants then exchanged their pieces. The second half of the project involved taking on each other's words, mannerisms, gestures, melodic and rhythmic speech patterns and inhabiting them through the rehearsal process as their own, thus the title, The Shared Breath Project. Here, in stage two the acting challenges evolved to be those of capturing the other and becoming the other through accurate mimicry that embraces Denis Diderot's concept of the Paradox of Acting, in that the actor is both seeming and being simultaneous. This paper shares the carefully documented process of making the live-streamed theatre production that resulted from these workshops, writing processes and rehearsals, and forming, The Shared Breath Project, which ultimately took the students' Realist, life-based pieces and edited them into a single unified theatre production. The paper also utilizes research on the Paradox of Acting, putting a Post-Structuralist spin on Diderot's theory. Here, the paper suggests the limitations of inhabiting the other by allowing that the other is always already a thing impenetrable but nevertheless worthy of unceasing empathetic, striving and delving in an epoch in which slow, careful attention to our fellows is in short supply.

Keywords : otherness, paradox of acting, oral history theatre, devised theatre, political theatre, community-based theatre, peoples' theatre

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