

A Creative Compass: How Documentary Theatre Can Lead Us Forward Post-Election

In the post-election United States, I have so many questions. What does it mean to be an artist in 2017? How do we move forward in our deeply divided neighborhoods, communities, and country at large? I'm also trying to figure out how to work with my own feelings of artistic helplessness. What can I do? Will it be enough? How do we juggle the traditions of theatre, while also searching for new ways that it can be nimbler in an increasingly urgent world?

In a time when the trend seems to be to generalize, publish, and share headlines without first checking facts, group people together (this happens on either and all "sides"), and make assumptions, we need to dare to tell individual, nuanced, and complex stories. The power lies not in having the answers, but in being willing to ask the questions. While documentary theatre has long been a meaningful strand of the theatrical world, we are now living in a time when it's a necessity because it is designed to raise questions and wade into the deep, where nothing is simple.

As a documentary theatre artist, I begin without an agenda, other than to simply be curious and willing to listen. That is the first step, and perhaps the ultimate goal as well.

Good stories, ones that inspire connection and truth and action, need to be *specific*. Documentary theatre is designed for times such as these. For various projects, I've interviewed military families, people waiting for the bus, and immigrants explaining what the American Dream means to them. Each and every time, I've arrived with my own assumptions about what I would hear. However, each and every time, I was blown away by how much each specific person shattered my ideas of who they might be and what values they hold dear. This disruption of my preconceived notions has occurred with every person I have interviewed, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or political party. Every human being is specific and we must tell stories that acknowledge and celebrate this inimitability. Specificity is our only hope to connect, co-exist, and break down the barriers that we believe divide us.

Documentary theatre does not require that we present answers, but only that we ask questions. As a documentary theatre artist, I begin without an agenda, other than to simply be curious and willing to listen. That is the first step, and perhaps the ultimate goal as well. We do not go into this work to prove our own point of view by exploiting the stories of others, but to ask questions and then really listen. If we let them, the stories we hear will help us create a map with which we might keep walking in this world, staying curious and open minded as we go. If we allow this perpetual curiosity to inform our journey, then we are always headed in the right direction, even if we never reach the destination. As artists, let's let go of our need for answers and wake up to the realization that we cannot afford not to ask the questions.

When you ask someone a question in an interview and then give them space to answer, something magical happens. People aren't used to be given the opportunity to share their story, no judgments or strings attached. When I begin an interview, the person often says, "I'm happy to tell you my story. It's not very interesting, but..." Not many people believe what they have to offer is valuable in a larger context, and documentary theatre lets us know that we all have something to contribute; our experiences are meaningful. How wonderful would it be to give this gift of listening to as many people as we can?



(Left to right): Teddy Crecelius, Christa Brown, Melissa Bergstrom, Sumit Sharma, and Emily Duggan in *Big Work* by Melissa Bergstrom and Kate Marple, with the Perpetual Visitors Theatre Company. Photo by Kate Marple.

Documentary theatre is low-cost, high-impact, and promotes collaboration between disciplines, communities, and what we think of as ‘artistic’ and ‘non-artistic’ entities.  

I have created documentary theatre with [The Perpetual Visitors Theatre Company](#) and high school and college students, and shared techniques with teachers across academic fields. There has never been a shortage of people willing to be interviewed, nor a shortage of curiosity for the makers. Documentary

theatre is low-cost, high-impact, and promotes collaboration between disciplines, communities, and what we think of as “artistic” and “non-artistic” entities. When I create a documentary play, I work with government organizations, community centers, churches, workers’ unions, and even pet stores; everyone involved benefits from engaging in this exchange of experiences.

Documentary theatre invites an audience that is as broad as the interviews themselves. I always invite interviewees and their circle of community to the finished production, and building this kind of expanded audience is one of the best things documentary theatre has to offer. Often those interviewed are not regular theatregoers, and we are all made richer for their presence. No one likes to be talked about as if they aren't there in the room, and when we make theatre from real stories, the real people behind these stories are gathered in and empowered.

The cost of listening and retelling these stories is minimal. The price of shutting our ears to this symphony of human experiences could cost us the kind of world worth living in. The rewards of this work are beyond what we can imagine. We cannot afford to exist in our separate bubbles any longer. We must tell the stories that we are not hearing on the news and dig deeper than the media dares. Documentary theatre challenges us to ask questions of people outside our own experience, discover common ground, and acknowledge where we disagree. It is time to stretch ourselves and our craft to give voice to these too often untold stories, and in doing so, make the theatre a model for how the rest of the world can break out of the echo chamber and expand its horizons.

In her book *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*, Anne Bogart includes an anecdote from dramaturg Morgan Jenness, who once asked Mother Teresa what she could do to help feed hungry people in the US, fearing that theatre was not enough. Mother Teresa replied, “There are many famines. In my country there is a famine of the body. In your country there is a famine of the spirit. And that is what you must feed.”

The time is now. The artist is you. All you need to know is what it is that you wish to know. Ask the first question, and see where it leads you. We’re all depending on it.

Posted January 21, 2017



Melissa Bergstrom



26 Comments

See also:

<http://www.mikewileyproductions.com/pdfs/plays/Documentary%20Theatre.pdf>

A Brief History of American Documentary Theatre

by Jules Odendahl-James

Broadly conceived, documentary theatre is fact-based performance composed using archival materials such as trial transcripts, official or government documents, iconic visual images or video footage, newspaper reporting, historical writing and recorded interviews. Documentary performances often emerge in response to social or political crises; documentary playwrights offer their audiences a theatrical presentation of real events to inspire critical questions about history, memory and justice as well as provoke social action to change the world outside the theater walls.

In twentieth-century America there have been three significant moments of innovation in the form and content of documentary performance. The first is marked by the work produced under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project (1935-1939). Their "Living Newspapers" used a form borrowed from overtly agit-prop (propaganda) and worker's theatre popular in early twentieth century Europe and the Soviet Union to address significant political and economic issues of the day. While their content was based in reality, the forms of these early documentary plays were decidedly modernist, often embracing collage, expressionism and minimalism in their dramaturgy and staging. This tension between factual content and expressionist form remains a hallmark of the documentary theatre genre.

The second moment of development appears during the social upheaval of the late 1960s, where public unrest regarding Civil Rights, the Vietnam War and economic inequities compelled a new generation of playwrights and theatre companies (such as The Living Theatre and the Open Theatre) to employ the documentary form as a way to question dominant media narratives as well as explode the boundaries of expected theatrical form and performance space. At this time, documentary artists built upon the notion of "fact-based" material with the belief that everyday life and individual, personal experiences provided suitable domains and material for documentary performances. Happenings, autobiographical solo performances and multimedia installations are just a few of the innovations from this era.

We are currently enjoying the third renaissance of American documentary theatre. Building upon the ground-breaking solo performances of Anna Deavere Smith in the late 1980s, this recent moment is characterized by collaborative development of the theatre performance among directors, designers, playwrights, actors and their documentary subjects (living and dead). The primacy of written archival documents has dwindled and interview-based materials have become central. These documentary performances continue to blur the boundaries between realism and more argument-based formal structures where juxtaposition, fluidity of time and place and multi-role casting are the norm.

Perhaps the most notable example of the current documentary theatre moment is *The Laramie Project* (2000), a play about the murder of college student Matthew Shepard, created by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project. In the first eighteen months following the murder, the company traveled from New York to Laramie, WY to interview members of the community about the event, its aftermath, and their attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality. The company's interview material became the centerpiece of a collaboratively built play that went through an extensive workshop development. The piece had a successful Off-Broadway run in 2001 and since its debut *The Laramie Project* has been produced by over 300 regional, college and high school theaters in the US and abroad. Colloquially, the piece has been credited with inspiring similar kinds of introspection about gay and lesbian civil rights in each community where it is performed.

The success of *The Laramie Project* is part of a wider American interest in "real" stories, including those found on mainstream reality television (e.g., *Survivor*, *The Jersey Shore*, *Project Runway*), in memoirs and creative non-fiction books, on public radio story/interview programs (e.g. *This American Life* and *StoryCorps*), and in an array of documentary filmmakers such as Michael Moore (*Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*), Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*, *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*), Ken Burns (*The Civil War*, *Baseball*), and Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Waiting for 'Superman'*). In the wake of this explosion of forms, there is also greater public scrutiny and critique of documentary artists, particularly the influence they have over the selection, shape and reception of their materials. The basic paradoxes of documentary theatre as both real and representation, representing multiple points of view but with a coherent, direct message, and critical of unified Truth while also offering a believable and compelling story are part of its complex, innovative and enduring history.

The contrasting characters of Anna Deavere Smith, from her 2009 play of *Let Me Down Easy* about health, healthcare, and medicine in the United States.

Photo credit: T. Charles Erickson, *The New York Times*.

Book cover for the published edition of *The Laramie Project*.

Academic Resources

Ping Chong and Company

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM5uTapXLM4> Beyond Sacred

<https://vimeo.com/71345635> Inside Out excerpts

<https://vimeo.com/19844207>- education video with explanation of the company

Project Brainstorm worksheet

Undesirable Elements has approached the following themes/categories in its writings

- Muslim Life
- Different Languages we speak
- Disabilities
- Asian Life

1. What theme or category might you explore through your playwriting? They can be similar to the Undesirable Elements choices or completely new. Write about 4 possible themes below on the first column of the chart.
2. Who might you interview to gain stories about these themes? Fill in any section of the chart where you can think of someone you might interview. You do not have to fill in every column if you can't think of someone.

For example I wrote:

Theme	You	Classmate	Parent	Adult
Childhood experiences	Ms. Tussey	Anne Perkins	Mom	Grandma

Chart to Fill in:

Theme	You	Classmate	Parent	Adult

Group reflections on Editing Process

Your Name: _____ Class Period: _____

Rate your group members and yourself in the chart below

	3: Excellent.	2: Satisfactory	1: Below Average	0: did not complete	
	You				
Preparedness-comes to class with hw and materials					
Respect-Respects the groups ideas and speaks respectfully					
Compromise-Allows for a compromise of ideas, listens to others, does not dominate the conversation					
Total	/9	/9	/9	/9	/9

1. How do you feel your group is working together? Are there any parts of the rubric you think the groups needs to work on?

2. Is there anything you're your teacher can do to assist you or help you succeed on this project. If so, what?

Self/Peer Rehearsal Performance Evaluation

Group Title: _____

Performance Rubric

Grade yourself or your peers on the following

	4	3	2	1
Group Cohesion		Group clapped together, the words flowed, everyone participated and parts were evenly distributed	Group had some trouble clapping together, the piece mostly flowed, everyone participated	Group had a lot of trouble clapping together, the piece was choppy, 1 or more people had very small parts and you didn't learn their story
Physical Choices (Blocking)	Expressive movement, every action is motivated, and we get a clear sense of the character from it. Movement tells a story.	Most movement fits the scene, but some seem to occur with no clear motivation.	Little movement occurs, or it seems unrehearsed and unmotivated. Actions do not fit the character.	No movement or movement is completely unmotivated..
Character / Vocal Choices	Very strong and distinct character. Emotions are believable.	Fairly strong character, but not fully thought out. Emotions are only sometimes believable	Character is weak, but still exists. Performer seems to be reciting lines rather than portraying a scene.	No clear character. Seems to be just a person on stage reading lines.
Concentration/Focus			The actors concentrated and didn't laugh or break during the performance.	Actor made a mistake but continued without breaking character

Category	You			
Group Cohesion				
Physical Choices				
Vocal Choices				
Concentration/Focus				

Turn over-->

You- Why did you give yourself the grades that you did?

Group- Did everyone collaborate equally and respectfully? Give an example.

Group-How do you think the performance could have improved?



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Documentary Theatre Performances

Greetings parents and friends I wanted to formally invite you to the performance of your student's plays. This year in Theatre Arts we have been working on directing each other in one-act plays. Your student will be performing on the following nights and we'd love for you to be there.

Here are the details:

Performance:

Tuesday, May 23rd, 5:00pm-6:15pm in the Blackbox (room 5) A Day Cast

Wednesday, May 24th, 5:00pm-6:20pm in the Blackbox (room 5) B Day Cast

Rehearsal: Just for your information here are the mandatory afterschool rehearsals

Thursday, May 18th 3:45-6:00pm in the Blackbox A Day Cast

Monday, May 22nd 3:45-6:00pm in the Blackbox B Day Cast

Parent please sign below and return it to Miss Tussey by 5/19:

* If a student does not attend their above performances they will not be able to pass Theatre Arts this year as this is our final project

_____ I understand that my student must attend the performances or they will fail Theatre Arts.

Parent Signature: _____

***If you plan on attending please indicate how many people you will be bringing:

Date Attending: _____

Attending: Number of people: _____

Please arrive at the main office between 4:40-4:55pm before the play.

After Performance Reflection

Name: _____

Self –Evaluation-Actor

After watching our performance in class please fill out the following and complete for homework.

Grade yourself using the following rubric:

Was the actor using appropriate body positions and stage position? _____(3)

3-Actor chose body position and stage positions to best portray their character

2-Actor is in an inappropriate body position or stage position 1 time

1- Actor is in an inappropriate body position or stage position 2 times

Did the actor create appropriate physical choices for their character? _____(3)

3- Actor had a variety of gestures and blocking that helped portray a unique character.

2-Actor had limited gestures and blocking.

1-Actor made one unique physical choice.

Character/Vocal Choices _____(3)

3-Very strong and distinct character. Emotions are believable

2- Fairly strong character, but not fully thought out. Emotions are only something believable.

1- Characters is weak, but still exists. Performer seems to be reciting lines rather than portraying scene.

Did the actor concentrate and not break focus? _____(5)

5-The actor concentrated and didn't laugh or break during the performance.

3-The actor broke focus 1 time but was able to recover and finish scene

0-The actor broke 2 + times or broke character and didn't recover.

Did the actor execute their technical assignment correctly? (if applicable) _____(5)

5- Performed all cues in a timely manner and did not make a mistake

3-Made one mistake but corrected it in a professional manner

1-Made two or more mistakes and corrected them or did not recover from a mistake.

_____/19

The response can be typed or hand written on your own paper but they should answer every question and be thoughtful.

1. Preparation-

How do you feel about your preparation before the play? How did you prepare? Did you feel you reviewed your lines enough? Did you feel you were confident in your character? Did you feel you were ready to complete the technical job you were given? Why or Why not?

2. Focus-

Did you feel you were focused during rehearsals? Did you feel you were focused during warm ups on the day of the performance? Do you feel you were focused onstage? Why or Why not? How did you focus or attempt to focus?

3. Acting-

Did you feel you showed your emotions in a believable way? Give an example of a line or moment when you did this.

Did you feel you used believable gestures/Movements for your character? Give an example of something you did or could have done.

Did you feel you had appropriate vocal choices for your character and you were loud enough? Give an example of a line you said and explain how you said it using the vocabulary words- pitch, volume and rate to explain.

4. Ensemble

Do you feel you were a positive addition to the ensemble? Why or Why not?

Do you feel that your performance elevated the play and your fellow actors? If so how, if not why not?

Were you on time and reliable? Did you make any mistakes with your lines or technical job that made it harder for the ensemble? If mistakes were made- how can you work to not make them in the future?

5. **Lesson-** What is one lesson you learned from this project that you want to remember for next year?

(This can be about life or acting/writing something to remember in college or for Theater Class next year)