

COLLABORATIVE THEATER OF TESTIMONY PERFORMANCE
AS CRITICAL PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR
THEATER ARTISTS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AUDIENCES, AND
PERFORMANCE STUDIES SCHOLARS

by

Claire Elizabeth Deal
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Committee:

Lorraine A. Brown Director
Margaret R. Yolcom

h. ev
J. Cooper

Program Director

Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

By

Claire Elizabeth Deal
Master of Fine Arts
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1990
Master of Arts
Furman University, 1985
Bachelor of Arts
Mercer University, 1983

Director: Dr. Lorraine A. Brown
Department of English

Fall Semester 2008
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Betty and Bob Deal, my first teachers, whose example instilled within me a curious mind, a love of learning, and the intrinsic value of doing my best in every endeavor.

This work is also dedicated to my brand new bride, Beverly Kathleen Rhoads, whose intelligence, beauty, strength, quick wit, connection with the natural world, and exuberant passion for both living well and playing hard amaze and inspire me daily.

And finally, this work is dedicated to Edith Smoak, my high school psychology teacher, mentor, and now, dear friend, whose inspiring work in the classroom exemplifies Alfred Mercier's promise that "what we learn with pleasure we never forget."

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ABSTRACT

COLLABORATIVE THEATER OF TESTIMONY PERFORMANCE AS CRITICAL PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEATER ARTISTS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AUDIENCES, AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES SCHOLARS

Claire Elizabeth Deal, PhD

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Lorraine A. Brown

This dissertation explores collaborative theater of testimony performance as a form of critical performance pedagogy, examining its transformative and heuristic potential for actors, audience members, and community members. Through an examination of two case studies, the author argues that participation in collaborative theater of testimony performance allows each of these constituents to experience insights about themselves and others that more traditional forms of knowledge acquisition do not or may not allow. As co-constructors of meaning during performance, audience members may experience moments of acute awareness that lead to new ways of seeing themselves and the world. This transformative potential extends to the community members whose experiences are reflected in the performance piece; for example, they may experience healing, vindication, or a sense of empowerment. Finally, collaborative theater of testimony performance challenges actors to address their own perspectives about identity,

representation, and difference. Because actors in such performances have worked closely with the people they embody on stage – and have developed relationships with them during the production process – their experiences differ from performers engaged in more typical rehearsal processes (study the script, learn the lines, rehearse the play). In light of these findings, the author calls for theater practitioners and performance studies scholars to engage their students not only with others across disciplines in their own institutions but also with community members outside the university campus. In so doing, community members, actors, and audience members have the opportunity to experience for themselves the transformative potential of collaborative theater of testimony performance and, ultimately, to use their new knowledge to effect social change.

INTRODUCTION

“In contrast to other arts, which produce an object and/or are communicated through media, here the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the act of reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now. Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place. The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously. The theatre performance turns the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium into a *joint* “text” even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience.” (Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* 17)

As Hans-Thies Lehmann observes in the introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre*, theater¹ practices since the 1970’s have been influenced by the same tenets of postmodernism that have affected other arts: a recognition that any artistic work is more than what meets the eye – the “meaning” of a work, if meaning is to be found, lies in the liminal place between the signs and signifiers that constitute the artistic process and the reception of that work by the viewer, listener, or audience member. Lehmann explains that in the postdramatic theater the text itself is but “one layer” of the dramatic event (17); the scenic elements act as signifiers, too, contributing in profound ways to what happens in the “collectively breathed air” shared by performers and audience members during the theatrical event.

The experiences of performers and spectators shared during “performing and spectating” and the experiences of artists and laypeople engaged in the processes of playwriting and rehearsal that eventually culminate in the theatrical event are the focus of

this study. I examine these experiences as they apply to contemporary theater of testimony in the United States, itself an example of a postdramatic theater.

The Postdramatic Theater

In essence, a postdramatic theater is a theater that is not dependent upon a written text; it is a theater that moves beyond a reliance on character and the plot-driven convention of Aristotelian drama – typically a story with rising action, conflict, and resolution – to a realm of seemingly infinite possibility.

This theater exists in numerous forms: productions which utilize Brecht's alienation effect, whereby the familiar is made to seem strangely unfamiliar; texts in which “language appears not as the speech of characters . . . but as an autonomous theatricality” (Lehmann 18); performance art pieces, one of which presents two caged performers displayed as “natives” to curious onlookers; world-wide readings and productions of *Lysistrata*, performed in protest of war; and community based improvisations that “rehearse” a revolution. The wide array of performance styles and situations is surpassed only by the various discourses that seek to define what comprises the postdramatic theater, what it does or *should* do, and how it strives to accomplish its goals.

The postdramatic theater, for all its variations in terms of scenic elements, mediated images, acting style, and the presence or absence of dialogue or plot, nonetheless has a unifying feature: a “renunciation of the traditions of dramatic form” (Lehmann 26). For Lehmann, “postdramatic” denotes a theater that “feels bound to operate beyond drama,” observing that in moving beyond traditional notions of dramatic

form it also, by definition, incorporates faint and seemingly hidden references or vestiges of the earlier form.

The importance of the “story” as critical to a dramatic text, for example, remained an important element in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, principle forces in breaking open a space for a new theater – one in which spectators did not lose themselves in the dramatic action of the play but were forced, both as a result of Brecht’s and Piscator’s innovative directing techniques and Piscator’s revolutionary scenic design, to “take a critical attitude” toward the action unfolding on the stage (Willett 178).² Spectators, their perspectives not manipulated through emotion, would then see their political and social circumstances with fresh eyes and, accordingly, be motivated to work together to transform society.

Brecht’s and Piscator’s assertions about the purpose of theater and the acting techniques required to realize those goals, coupled with Piscator’s ground-breaking technical innovations, proved revolutionary. The influence of these two men – discussed in more detail in Chapter One – cannot be understated, for they joined forces to create productions that overtly rejected the conventions of the Aristotelian model, replacing them with new conventions that are now viewed as commonplace in the contemporary theater. Brecht and Piscator’s then radical and revolutionary approaches to theater have led to what may more appropriately be called a “post –Brechtian theatre,” what Lehmann describes as

precisely not a theatre that has nothing to do with Brecht but a theatre which knows that it is affected by the demands and questions for theatre

that are sedimented in Brecht's work but can no longer accept Brecht's answers. (27)

Enter Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance*, a text that answers Brecht's call for a theater whose purpose is social change, but whose strategies for bringing about that change rely not on the Brechtian element of audience alienation but on the engagement of the audience with the actor during the moment of performance. Dolan describes performances that include what she calls *utopian performatives*:³

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (5)

Dolan's debt to Brecht is clear; she writes that it is her task in *Utopia in Performance* to explore how performance allows audience members to "see *as if for the first time or see anew*, through an alienation effect that's emotionally resonant" (italics in the original) (33). And, too, Dolan points to the potential of such productions to awaken people to, at the very least, the potential for and possibility of social change. Hers is not a naïve hope: She acknowledges that the efficacy of art cannot be measured in the same ways as one measures "a piece of legislation"; she also admits that a performance of *Def Poetry Jam* cannot change the world. However, she does believe

that the experience of performance, and the intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind, can provide new frames of reference for

how we see a better future extending out from our more ordinary lives.
Seeing that vision, we can figure out how to achieve it outside the
fantastical, magic space of performance. (20)

I have experienced those tracings first hand and can attest to their power – as can the many scholars and theater practitioners whose work I describe in the chapters to follow. Too, I argue that the experiences leading up to the performance event can open participants to new ways of seeing the world, themselves, and, importantly, one another. More specifically, I argue that in theater of testimony performance, the opportunity to *see anew* exists not only in the exchange between actor and audience, but long before – in the preparatory stages of performance, those moments of intensity shared among actors, subjects, playwrights, and directors.

Research Questions Guiding This Study

In the chapters that follow I examine theater of testimony performance as critical performance pedagogy – looking particularly at how collaborative theater of testimony performance processes (including preliminary interviews and research, script development, rehearsal, and performance) influence the acquisition of knowledge for community members, artists, and audiences involved in these processes.

Theater of testimony, also described as “verbatim theater,” is a form of theatrical performance created from the narratives of real people interwoven with excerpts from primary documents such as diaries, letters, participant observers’ field notes, court transcripts, and other texts.

A form of performance ethnography, theater of testimony is a vehicle for exploring social injustices and challenging socially constructed stereotypes of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other types of difference, as exemplified in several recent notable professional projects: Eve Ensler's work with incarcerated women at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, *What I Want My Words to Do to You*; Anna Deavere Smith's examination of racial tensions following the police beating of Rodney King, *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*, and her work focusing on racial tensions in Crown Heights, *Fires in the Mirror*; Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project* about the death of gay college student Matthew Shepard; Marc Wolf's *Another American Asking and Telling*, about the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy; Emily Mann's work *Execution of Justice*, about the California trial of Dan White for the murders of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone; and Leigh Fondakowski's *The People's Temple*,⁴ about the mass murder-suicides of followers of the Rev. Jim Jones' Peoples Temple in California.

While scholars have noted the effect of such performances on audience members, and, to a lesser degree, the subjects of the performance piece, little attention has been paid to the effect on the performers *themselves* – the central focus of my project. Through a review of scholarly literature and in two separate case studies, I examine how performance functions as a way of knowing for actors who embody – in speech, in physicality, in emotional intensity – the experiences of others whom they have likely stereotyped according to representations in popular culture and various media. I argue that because the actors in a collaborative theater of testimony production have first-hand

knowledge of the real-life characters they portray and have developed relationships with them, their experiences are much richer than the experiences of performers who've not participated in the development of the piece.

Anna Deavere Smith, respected playwright and actor, both interviews and then portrays dozens of people in her one-woman theater of testimony works. For Smith, embodiment is the critical component of her artistic approach. Inhabiting another person's words and movements provides Smith with the means to "find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally." In the preface to *Fires in the Mirror* she writes, "Learning about the other by being the other requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of the body, mind, and heart, as well as the words" (xxvii).

Smith notes that such exploration has the potential for wider effect, posing the question: "Could language also be a photograph of what was unseen about society just as it reflects what is unseen in an individual?" (*Fires in the Mirror* xxxiii). Smith's query leads me to relevant questions that propel my work:

1. In what ways do representations of community members in theater of testimony productions influence community members' identity constructions?
2. After the performance is shared with an audience, to what extent do community members view themselves and their circumstances differently?

3. In what ways do the participants in the collaborative theater of testimony project – including actors, community members, and audience members – discover if or to what degree their differences separate them?
4. To what extent, if at all, did engaging in the collaborative performance project help to bridge those gaps?
5. In what ways, if at all, were audience members' preconceptions conferred or challenged as a result of their participating as co-constructors of meaning during the performance?
6. What are the implications of this research study for scholars and theater professionals? For theater and performance studies students?

As I suggest above, my concern in investigating collaborative theater of testimony performance lies in its critical potential – that is, its potential to effect change, in attitude and/or behavior, within each of four constituents: audiences, community members, theater artists, and performance studies scholars. A rich body of literature exists, as I have suggested above, that points to the efficacy of theater for audience members. I am indebted to Brecht and Piscator's work in epic theater – an avowedly political theater with the goal of stimulating audience members to work for social change – for one of the earliest models of how theater of testimony influences audience members after they leave the theater space.

What is notable about my work, however, is that in my research project I move beyond the traditional notion of epic theater, exploring theater of testimony's potential to transform *participants*; while Brecht maintained that the actor was to maintain a sense of

detachment from the character – stating, for example, that “ the actor must remain a demonstrator” (Willett 125) – in my work I look toward both the connections that collaborative theater of testimony actors have with the characters (real people) they portray and the transformative potential that exists within those relationships. Similarly, I explore theater of testimony’s potential to empower the subjects of the performance piece, the community members represented on stage.

It is my contention that theater of testimony can, and, importantly, *should* do two things – provoke audiences and enrich the actor’s and community member’s experience in significant ways. In short, in my dissertation research I have been most interested in the shared experience of participants both during the early phases of ethnographic exploration, and, where applicable, text development, rehearsal and performance stages – their interactions, self-discoveries, and new knowledge gained through their collaboration. To a somewhat lesser degree, I have explored the audience response to the performance itself, examining the potential of performance to subvert the cultural assumptions associated with people from the community/communities of interest.

The Study’s Relevance in Related Disciplinary Fields

Cultural studies draws from numerous disciplines, including performance studies, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, communication studies, folklore, psychology, English, queer studies, gender studies, theater studies, and linguistics, just to name a few. My research similarly draws from numerous disciplines. In the chapters that follow, I look primarily to the work of scholars in performance and theater studies, communication studies, ethnography, and folklore studies for insight into theories of performance,

specifically texts about how performance functions as critical performance pedagogy for performing artists, community members, and audience members. Of course, there is much overlap among these various fields, with the slippery term “performance” serving as the unify concept. That said, I consider this work to be most relevant to theater and performance studies scholars.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony and Performance Studies

Richard Schechner, one of the pioneers of the field of performance studies and author of “What is Performance Studies Anyway?” argues that

[p]erformance studies is “inter” – in between. It is intergeneric, interdisciplinary, intercultural – and therefore inherently unstable. Performance studies resists or rejects definition. As a discipline, Performance Studies cannot be mapped effectively because it transgresses boundaries, it goes where it is not expected to be. It is inherently “in between” and therefore cannot be pinned down or located exactly. (360)

On a related note, the founder of Northwestern University’s performance studies program, the late Dwight Conquergood, argues that within performance studies there exists three “crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis” (“Performance Studies” 318) that point not only to the depth and breadth of what performance studies scholars do but also to the objects of their study:

We can think through performance (1) as a work of *imagination*, as an object of study; (2) as a pragmatics of *inquiry* (both as model and method),

as an optic and operator of research; (3) as a tactics of *intervention*, an alternative space of struggle. (“Performance Studies” 318)

Conquergood argues that Northwestern’s integrative approach to performance studies bridges the hierarchical divides that often exist between researchers/scholars and artists/practitioners, the latter of whom are often relegated to second-class status in the academy. He calls for a performance studies agenda that “collapses this divide and revitalizes the connections between artistic accomplishment, analysis, and articulations with communities” (“Performance Studies” 319).

In my dissertation, I weave together all three strands of Northwestern’s approach: first, I investigate theater of testimony as a particular form of theatrical production; second, I investigate how engaging in performance operates as a unique pedagogy; and third, I investigate the potential of collaborative theater of testimony “to contribute to the national dialogue on current events” (Kaufman 12) and the responsibility of performance studies and theater scholars, as well as practitioners in both disciplines, to engage in this dialogue as a part of their work.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony and Theater Studies

Jill Dolan, author of *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, suggests that performance should be used to “stage arguments, to embody knowledge and politics, to open a community to itself and the world in ways that are dangerous, visceral, compelling, and moving” (64). Dolan, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, argues that the academy provides the optimal environment for artists to examine contemporary culture. I share this belief. Indeed, she notes that rather than

spending their energies and resources in reproducing the work that regional theaters are doing (who are often reproducing the latest Broadway and off-Broadway hits), university theaters should take more risks, producing new works and lesser known works that would raise issues and produce performances that “reach deeper, intellectually, artistically, and even spiritually” (51).

For Dolan, performance allows theater scholars and practitioners to become participants in public life, providing in university theaters places where “key political and social issues are worked out” (55). She notes that while there is much academic interest at present in theories of the performative, there is little interest in seeing theatrical performances as “located historical sites for interventionist work in social identity constructions” (65). Dolan envisions university theaters as “spaces that might productively be given over to theories and practices of performance in all its aspects, and studies of identity in all its complex intersectional variety, rather than protected as museums to house imitations of canonical white masterpieces” (71). My research has further convinced me that college and university theater programs should facilitate collaborative theater of testimony performances that link theater students with citizens in their local communities.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony and Ethnography

I have endeavored to conduct my research such that it answers ethnographer Norman Denzin’s call for a “performative cultural studies” or, put another way, “a model of social science that is performative” (*Performance Ethnography* 11), one that both acknowledges the performance paradigm in the human disciplines while it recognizes its

political potential. Such a model calls for new ways to present research – theater of testimony, a form of performance ethnography, answers this call.

Rather than privileging the ethnographer's detachment inherent in the traditional ethnographic text, "performance ethnography represents and performs rituals from everyday life, using performance as a method of representation and a method of understanding" (*Performance Ethnography* 33). Such is the case with theater of testimony performance. Denzin argues that performance ethnography is already well-established, for ethnographers have, over the last ten to fifteen years, staged "reflexive ethnographic performances" in nontraditional formats. Michal McCall notes that "in the late 1980's and early 1990's, sociologists began to turn their ethnographic field notes into performances, and theater artists and academics in performance studies began to produce or adapt ethnographies in order to perform them" (116). By way of example, McCall notes Anna Deavere Smith's work as a form of performance ethnography.

One of the most intriguing elements of "performed ethnographies" is that they allow ethnographers, performers (who may be, as is the case in some collaborative theater of testimony, members of the community presented), and audience members to share in the construction of meaning during the live performance event. Denzin explains that "[i]n the moment of performance, these texts have the potential to overcome the biases of a positivist, ocular, visual epistemology. They undo the gazing eye of the modernist ethnographer, bringing audiences and performers into a jointly felt and shared field of experience" (*Performance Ethnography* 37). It is important to note, too, as Denzin points out, that each audience member brings his or her own past experiences to

the performance – thus, the performance is received differently by each person in attendance. Denzin advocates that ethnographers engaging in performance ethnography adopt what he calls a “feminist, communitarian moral ethic,” a stance that I have endeavored to follow in my work. This perspective

. . . seeks narratives that ennoble human experience, performances that facilitate civic transformations in the public and private spheres. This ethic ratifies the dignities of the self and honors personal struggle. It understands cultural criticism to be a form of empowerment that begins in that ethical moment when individuals are led into the troubling spaces occupied by others. In the moment of coperformance, lives are joined and struggle begins anew. (*Performance Ethnography* 56)

This ethic, as Denzin explains, is important for social scientists and ethnographers working in the seventh moment of qualitative inquiry, a time when the line between performativity (doing) and performance (done) has disappeared. In other words, Denzin argues that contemporary researchers realize, following Conquergood (“Beyond the Text” 25) that writing about culture – the writing itself being a performance – is also creating and altering culture.

I realize that theater of testimony has the potential to effect change – and, as I discuss in Chapter One, it also has the potential to exploit members of the communities presented. And so, it is important that my narrative, my dissertation, contribute to the discourse in relevant disciplines following the feminist, communitarian, moral ethic.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony and Sociology

My work is also relevant to sociology, for my inquiry, as I discuss below, is grounded in the interpretive or constructivist paradigm that has as a central assumption the social construction of reality. The members of the communities often explored in theater of testimony tend to be from communities who are misunderstood or misrepresented – including, but not limited to, inmates, transvestites, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, members of religious communities, low-income workers, homeless people, crime victims, drug addicts, and sex workers– and for whom numerous socially constructed stereotypes exist. Theater of testimony performances strive to disrupt these constructions by presenting ethnographic findings in a format accessible to diverse audiences.

My research suggests that theater of testimony and other forms of performance ethnography have the potential to alter audience members' perceptions, certainly an important claim that may motivate artists and scholars to utilize performance ethnography as a means to foster tolerance and understanding among seemingly disparate groups. I've also found that often the subjects of theater of testimony projects are empowered by seeing their stories performed on stage. Additionally, my research suggests that when performers engage in embodied performance, their perceptions about the people they portray are altered as well.

As a teacher, I am very interested in the potential of theater of testimony to build community and lessen stereotypes and assumptions my students hold about others different from themselves. Many of the privileged young men I teach at Hampden-

Sydney College are working to become leaders in their communities and, if successful in this endeavor, will likely have the power to influence others. As I discuss in the case study presented in Chapter Four, participating in a collaborative theater of testimony project challenged my students' assumptions about people they viewed as vastly different from themselves (inmates at our Piedmont Regional Jail) – and about the society in which they and others live. It is my great hope that this experience will influence them to become leaders with a sense of social justice and civic responsibility. Equally important, our collaborative theater of testimony experience proved to be a positive experience for our community partners, a group of inmates at the regional jail in Farmville, Virginia.

Finally, I trust that the work of this project will also be relevant to other scholars and practitioners, including people working in social justice issues; arts advocates; educators involved in experiential education and service-learning; community leaders, and academics working in gender studies, cultural studies, and other related disciplines.

Research Methods

My primary research approach is best defined as comparative case study, involving numerous types of evidence: written texts (including scholarly articles, stage manager/actor/director logs, transcribed interviews, reviews, performance scripts, etc.), live performances and post-show discussions with ensemble members and audiences, interviews with actor/ playwrights, and my own experience as a director. I endeavored to tease out from these various sources evidence that points to the ways in which theater of testimony functions as critical performance pedagogy for the people associated with the projects – the ethnographers, dramaturgs, actors, directors, designers, audience members,

and community members. I examined texts from writers in various disciplines – performance studies, cultural studies, sociology, theater studies, folklore, communication studies, and others – in keeping with the cross-disciplinary foundation of performance studies itself.

In selecting which theater of testimony productions to study, I followed Robert Stake’s advice to “take that case from which we feel we can learn the most” (243), in terms of the case itself *and* the phenomenon (critical performance pedagogy). As such, I researched the following productions; *Injunction Granted; Power; Triple-A Plowed Under; Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992; Another American: Asking and Telling; Fires in the Mirror; I Think I Like Girls; Still Life*, and *Women and War*. I also researched and attended several professional theater of testimony productions over the past four or five years, in Virginia, Maine, and Chicago: *The Exonerated, The Laramie Project, Execution of Justice, The People’s Temple, Women and the Sea*, and *Pieces of My Heart*. I include my findings about these productions in Chapters One and Two, both as examples of the theater of testimony form and of theater of testimony as critical performance pedagogy.

In Chapters Three and Four, I narrow my focus to two very different case studies. First, I present excerpts from a series of interviews I conducted with Kelli Simpkins, a professional actor who has been involved in the creation and performance of two seminal theater of testimony works, *The Laramie Project* and *The People’s Temple*, and who has acted in another important work theater of testimony work, *Execution of Justice*. In the final chapter, I juxtapose Simpkins’ experiences with the experiences of a group of fledgling actors, many of whom have never attended a play before, actors who

participated in a show I directed in the fall of 2006, *Committed*. The actors in this production were students enrolled in a theater class at Hampden-Sydney College and inmates enrolled in an acting course at Piedmont Regional Jail.

Interestingly, as a form of inquiry, case study is considered, in the words of Robert Stake, “not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied” (236). Stake continues, “We choose to study the case. . . . As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used” (236). He states that case studies may be either qualitative or quantitative; my work is this project is qualitative. Stake identifies three types of case studies, including intrinsic (looking at one case because it has intrinsic value), instrumental (using a case study to provide insight into an existing theory or issue), and collective, the most relevant choice for my work. Stake explains that collective case studies

inquire into the phenomenon, population, or general condition. . . .

Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest the common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each having voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (237)

Indeed, it is precisely for these reasons that I selected the experiences of a professional actor and the experiences of non-professionals in a rural community for my inquiry. One challenge inherent in collective case studies is that the researcher runs the risk of making wide generalizations when comparing cases and thereby slights the

uniqueness of the individual case. Stake argues that while collective case studies can move toward generalization, generalization should not be emphasized in all cases, because in doing so “the researcher’s attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself” (238). Stake explains that readers bring much to the table in terms of making meaning of the case studies presented. Stake cautions the researcher about making too many direct comparisons between cases as this robs readers from approaching the research in their own terms and from their own situations.

Stake also offers advice to researchers as they begin the important task of reporting their research: “The case researcher emerges from one social experience, the observation, to choreograph another, the report. Knowledge is socially constructed – we constructivists believe – and thus case study researchers assist readers in the construction of knowledge” (240). Put another way, writing itself is a performance, an observation that informs my work. Stake, echoing the sentiments of theater of testimony playwrights, suggests that writers should endeavor to present, with as much objectivity as one can, the evidence gathered in the research process, thus allowing the reader to participate in the “construction of knowledge”:

When the researcher’s narrative provides opportunity for vicarious experience, readers extend their memories of happenings. . . . Naturalistic, ethnographic case materials, to some extent, parallel actual experience, feeding into the most fundamental processes of awareness and understanding. . . . Enduring meanings come from encounter, and are modified and reinforced by repeated encounter. (240)

I have portrayed each case study as objectively as possible, offering up the testimonies of participants so that they may largely speak for themselves and so that the reader can, as does the audience member in a theater of testimony production, construct her or his own meaning out of the case studies I present.

The strength of case studies, writes Hayes et. al., is that they are “detailed and try to capture something of the complexity of events . . . they provide opportunities for discovering unexpected relations . . . allow[ing] us to recognize the uniqueness of people and events” (91). These are the goals of my dissertation research as well.

Theoretical Perspectives Informing the Study

Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul argue that all research is grounded by the particular theoretical perspectives embraced by the researcher herself. These perspectives, or paradigms, inform how the researcher looks at the world, interprets what she sees, and decides what is most valid and important to present after the research is complete (41). I view my dissertation research as a synthesis of two paradigms, for each has elements that represent my understanding and perspective on both culture and cultural studies.

The primary theoretical perspective that I adhere to is the interpretive or constructivist perspective. Researchers working from this perspective view their work as inherently participatory, believing that “meaning can be created only through interaction” (LeCompte and Schensul 49). The researcher must be present in the research process so that she may observe the construction process at work, all the while aware that her presence, too, affects the interaction among participants. As such, the interpretive

paradigm assumes a blurring of the lines between researcher and researched, with equal weight given to all parties in the research process. In a collaborative theater of testimony process, these lines are similarly blurred.

Because the interpretive approach does not, by definition, possess an activist orientation, I turn to the critical paradigm as another underpinning to my research. In this paradigm the researcher operates from the standpoint of an intellectual advocate and activist, looking closely at the ways in which gender, class, ethnicity, race, and power intersect in a particular cultural context. Critical theorists assume that the phenomenon under investigation (theater of testimony as critical performance pedagogy) and its interpretation are influenced by the context in which it is constructed (LeCompte and Schensul 45-47).

For example, as a critical researcher engaged in a theater of testimony project at Hampden-Sydney College, I acknowledge that the demographics of the student body (largely white, upper middle class, conservative, heterosexual, and southern) shape the perspectives and cultural assumptions of Hampden-Sydney College men – contributing, as I have argued in prior publications, to the sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia present on our campus.

In examining my work on *Committed*, a theater of testimony project I directed with Hampden-Sydney College theater students and inmates enrolled in an acting class at Piedmont Regional Jail, I was acutely aware of how my sex, occupation, age, class, sexual orientation, and race affected not only the students' and inmates' interactions with me but also my interpretation of the project.

Chapter Preview

This work is divided into four chapters, two comprising the literature review and two presenting case studies in theater of testimony performance practices. In Chapter One I present a review of two important influences on contemporary theater of testimony performance, Brecht's Epic Theater and the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers. Then, I provide a definition of theater of testimony as it is used today, explore the challenges of working in the form, and offer examples of important contemporary theater of testimony works. I also present my definition of collaborative theater of testimony, the form that is the primary focus of this work.

Chapter Two serves as a review of the scholarly literature surrounding critical performance pedagogy, the potential of performance to transform the consciousness of performers, subjects, and audience members. I look to the work of performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison as a frame for my discussion of the transformative potential of performance for each of the three constituents cited above. I conclude Chapter Two with a discussion of the ethical considerations facing artists working in the theater of testimony form, looking again to the work of Dwight Conquergood for inspiration and instruction.

In Chapters Three and Four I present my findings in two case studies, beginning with the work of Kelli Simpkins, a professional actor with wide experience in theater of testimony performance. Simpkins' thoughtful and often eloquent responses to my questions provide "on the ground" evidence of the potential of collaborative theater of testimony to influence the attitudes of community members, actors, and audience

members. The final chapter focuses on my directorial work in collaborative theater of testimony performance, the project noted above that I facilitated with Hampden-Sydney College students and inmates at Piedmont Regional Jail.

In the conclusion I offer my own testimony to the power of collaborative performance processes and point to the implications that such processes hold for community members, theater artists, audiences, and performance studies scholars.

A Caveat: Writing about Performance

Finally, I would be remiss not to point out the irony that exists in *writing* a dissertation about *performance*, for, as I discuss in the chapters to follow, performance must be *experienced* for it to be grasped. Performance is, after all, “an experiential, participatory epistemology,” a phrase Conquergood uses to explain Frederick Douglass’ description of the visceral emotions evoked by and the instructive potential of slave songs for the hearer. Douglass claimed that a person would better understand the horror of slavery upon hearing these plaintive songs than by “reading whole volumes of [slavery’s] mere physical cruelties” (qtd. in Conquergood, “Beyond the Text” 27).

Dolan articulates the problem of how to evoke, in words alone, the subtleties of a particular theatrical performance – how to make it “live well beyond itself” so that one might communicate its nuances before critically examining it. Dolan speaks for all performance theorists when she asks,

How can we capture, in our discourse, not just the outlines of a performance’s structure and form, its content and the contours of its

narrative, but the ineffable emotion it provokes in its moment of presence? How can we evoke, in writing, how its presence grounds us in a present, a moment of life at the theater, that seems somehow imbued with our past and our future, at once? (*Utopia in Performance* 9)

The fact is, that no matter how gifted the writer, performance must be experienced firsthand; it simply cannot be recreated in words, or for that matter, in a digital recording. The “liveness” of it happens but once in a particular space and context, with a particular ensemble of actors, and with a particular gathering of individuals who constitute a unique community of spectators.

Conquergood calls for performance studies scholars to use “performance to decenter, not necessarily discard, the textualism that pervades” academic practice (*Beyond the Text* 26). He cites two reasons that performance itself is a worthy mode of inquiry:

(1) performance-sensitive ways of knowing hold forth the promise of contributing to an epistemological pluralism that will unsettle valorized paradigms and thereby extend understanding of multiple dimensions and a wider range of meaningful action; (2) performance is a more conceptually astute and inclusionary way of thinking about many subaltern cultural practices and intellectual-philosophical activities. Whereas a textual paradigm privileges distance, detachment, and disclosure as ways of knowing, e.g., “knowledge means rising above immediacy,” a performance paradigm insists upon immediacy, involvement, and

intimacy as modes of understanding, e.g., “the primordial meaning of knowledge as a mode of being-together-with” (Said 36; M. Jackson 8).
(*Beyond the Text* 26).

Conquergood advocates balancing performance with traditional scholarly writing, noting that eschewing texts altogether is not a feasible option for scholars; he also suggests that arguing for an either-or situation creates yet another binary that will eventually get displaced by something else. He imagines “juxtaposing performed scholarship with written scholarship, instead of jettisoning the text” (*Beyond the Text* 33). As such, I have made available, in George Mason University’s Fenwick Library, a DVD of the collaborative theater of testimony piece I directed with students and inmates, *Committed*. Following Conquergood, I view performance as “a complement, supplement, alternative, and critique of inscribed texts” (*Beyond the Text* 33). There are written texts, yes: a performance script, the transcribed testimonies of actors, and the written description of a performed play. But these texts exist most powerfully in performance – the performance itself *is*, in a very real sense, *the scholarship*.

Conquergood critiques exclusively text-based scholarship, noting that “[i]nstead of endeavoring to rescue the *said* from the *saying* [what the text folks want to do], a performance paradigm struggles to recuperate the *saying* from the *said*, to put mobility, action, and agency back into play” (italics in the original) (*Beyond the Text* 31). Conquergood thus views performance not as Aristotle did, as *mimesis*, but as *kinesis*, a process enlisted in “breaking and remaking” (italics in the original) (*Beyond the Text* 32). For Conquergood, and scores of performance scholars and practitioners following his

lead, performance is “*transgression*, that force which crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings and normative traditions and plunges us back into the vortices of political struggle” (italics in the original) (32) : a fitting definition for contemporary theater of testimony performance.

My caveat thus offered – the acknowledgment that the words to follow cannot fully do justice to the performances and performance practices presented herein – I now move to Chapter One, “Theater of Testimony Performance in the United States.”

CHAPTER 1: THEATER OF TESTIMONY PERFORMANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

“If we want a truly popular literature, alive and fighting, completely gripped by reality and completely gripping reality, then we must keep pace with reality’s headlong development. The great working masses of the people are on the move. The activity and brutality of their enemies proves it.” (Bertolt Brecht, “The Popular and the Realistic” 112)

As noted in the introduction, my purpose is to examine critical performance pedagogy within a specific theatrical genre: theater of testimony in the United States. In this chapter and the one immediately following I provide a review of selected scholars’ research and theater artists’ insights and experiences in each of these areas.

To begin, I provide an overview of theater of testimony performance, looking first at two important influences on the form – Brecht’s and Piscator’s Epic Theater and the Federal Theatre Project’s documentary-based Living Newspapers. I then provide a definition of theater of testimony and discuss the unique challenges facing those working in the form. Too, by examining selected playwrights’ texts and scholars’ critical writings, I demonstrate how these authors incorporate the principles and techniques first developed in Brecht’s Epic Theater and later demonstrated in the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspapers as a means to a similar end – to elucidate for audience members a particular sociopolitical issue in an effort to promote social change. Finally, I conclude the chapter

with a definition of *collaborative* theater of testimony, the form I examine in conjunction with critical performance pedagogy in later chapters of this work.

Brecht's Influence on Theater of Testimony

Theater of testimony performance in the United States has its roots in Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater, an avowedly political theater with the goal of producing social change. Peter Thomson, in his preface to *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, described Brecht as "a dominant force in the twentieth-century theater" (xxxi); Michael Patterson, author of several texts on German Theater, addresses Brecht's wide-ranging influence by noting that "[f]or playwrights or theater practitioners to have their names turned into adjectives is a somewhat dubious accolade that is rarely accorded But the one adjective that lifts most easily off the tongue . . . is undoubtedly 'Brechtian'" (273).

Most often, when a production is deemed Brechtian, it possesses the characteristically Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung*, translated most often as "alienation," but sometimes as "estrangement" or "defamiliarisation" (Brooker 193). Richard Schechner describes the intention of *Verfremdungseffekt* [translated as *the alienation effect*] as "a way to drive a wedge between the actor, the character, the staging (including blocking, design, music, and any other production element) so that each is able to bounce off of, and comment upon, the others" (*Performance Studies* 152-53).

Brecht accomplished this estrangement by disrupting the audience's acceptance of the theatrical act as "real" by incorporating several techniques such as distancing the actor from the role (actors were to "show," not "become" their characters), breaking down the fourth wall, using titles and song to disrupt the action of the play, and exposing

the machinations of the theater itself. Brecht asserted, “What is ‘natural’ must have the effect of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the [societal] laws of cause and effect” (Willett 71).

Brecht, and the technicians and designers of the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspapers discussed below, drew inspiration from the innovative work of the German director/producer, Erwin Piscator (1893-1966). For example, Piscator integrated material from newspapers, parliamentary speeches, memoirs, and newsreels into his playscripts. Too, he incorporated elaborate machinery in staging his plays; for example, he used giant treadmills to show the progression of the “relentless war machine” in his 1928 production of *The Good Soldier Schweik* (Barranger). These treadmills were also used to bring characters on stage (Willett 66).

Brecht writes often of Piscator’s influence, noting that “Piscator, who without doubt is one of the most important theatre men of all times, began to transform [the theatre’s] scenic potentialities” (Willett 77). Among the innovations Brecht cites is Piscator’s use of film and projections which allowed the setting to be “thus awakened to life and [to begin] to play on its own, so to speak; the film was a new, gigantic actor that helped to narrate events” (Willett 77-78). At a recent Chicago production of *The People’s Temple*, for example, news footage of Temple members boarding planes for Jonestown was shown as a background while a surviving member related his memory of the event.

The use of projections also meant that documents and photographs could be projected; such was the case in the performance noted above – photographs of dozens of

the people who died in Jonestown were projected as survivors recounted the horrific events of the November day on which fellow Temple members died.

Piscator also introduced the use of moving platforms on stage. Brecht writes in “The German Drama: pre-Hitler” that one such use of the moving platforms was in a production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*: “The famous march to Budweis [staged on a moving platform] . . . took a half-hour and . . . was made great and entertaining by the actor Max Pallenberg” (Willett 78). Piscator introduced the use of the elevator stage as well, a device which allowed directors to include “vertical action” on the stage (Willett 78). Brecht wrote, in a moment of wit, that Piscator “would hoist his actors up and down in space; now and again they would break a leg, but we were patient with them” (Willett 66)!

Piscator’s influence continued in sound design – in a production of *Rasputin*, for example, Piscator incorporated a record of Lenin’s voice, a technique which served to interrupt the performance. Another example of Piscator’s technical achievement is found in a production in which he simultaneously played the sound of a sick man’s heart beating and projected a film showing a heart contracting (Willett 102).

Piscator’s design influence is frequently seen in contemporary theater of testimony performance in the United States. For example, in a recent production of Emily Mann’s *Execution of Justice*, titles were projected on a large screen upstage; actors addressed the audience directly, and music – in the form of percussive sounds imitating gun shots – underscored much of the production. The director’s choices in *Execution of Justice* effectively portrayed the circus-like atmosphere pervading the trial of Dan White,

the police officer who murdered San Francisco mayor George Moscone and gay City Supervisor, Harvey Milk, in 1978. It is hard to imagine that any jury would accept what has subsequently come to be known as White's "Twinkie defense," but, as is made clear in the playscript, the jury did just that. Subsequent protests in the streets of San Francisco over White's acquittal testified to the outrage of not only the gay community but the heterosexual community as well.

Viewing the play today, contemporary audience members see the corruption that infiltrated White's trial – among other things, the rigging of the jury, the defense's reliance on fellow police officers and firefighters as character witnesses, and weaknesses on the part of the prosecution in what should have been an open and shut case. (White confessed to the murders within hours after committing them.) Contemporary audiences, with *Execution of Justice* as a point of comparison, may be compelled to examine today's media-frenzied trials with similar skepticism.

Brecht first used the expression "epic theater" in a 1926 interview with Bernard Guillemain in Berlin, identifying the term with "reason" as opposed to "empathy," the prevailing type of audience response sought by Brecht's contemporaries. Brecht, likely drawing on the movement known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* – *sachlich* is translated as "matter-of-fact" and refers to a type of realism with socialistic intent – called for a theater that would "bring out the material incidents in a perfectly sober and matter-of-fact way" (Willett 15-17), such that the audience could rationally consider the issues raised.

The word "epic" is not used in the sense of great narrative works about legendary heroes (such as Homer's the *Iliad*), but more in the sense of "epoch," an extended period

of time marked by a particular set of social relations within a specific mode of production, for example, the thirty years war in *Mother Courage*. Brecht viewed his epic theater as a weapon in the Marxist struggle to change existing ideologies and, eventually, society itself. Brecht's use of both the alienation effect and other techniques, including direct address, jarring sound effects, and projected scene titles, was designed to reveal societal ills as "historically produced and open to transformation in the real world" (Brooker 193). And so, Brecht's techniques served as a "means to an end"; it was, as Brooker notes, Brecht's aim to

use the resources of art, in ways consistent with the tenets of dialectical materialism, to historicize and negate the commonplace and taken-for-granted, to prise [sic] open social and ideological contradictions, and so both demonstrate and provoke an awareness of the individual's place in a concrete narrative. (186)

Reflecting on the efficacy of his production processes, Brecht asserted, following Marx, that "[this theater] became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it" (Willett 72).

In contemporary theater of testimony performance, theater artists and practitioners strive to do the same – to look with skepticism upon today's postcolonial, postmodern, globalized "everyday"; to expose social constructions of gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other forms of difference that lead to exploitation and discrimination; and to engage audiences in critical analyses of the status quo – all in an effort to provide

equal opportunities and social justice for people marginalized and oppressed by those in positions of power.

As noted above, epic theater exists in the intersection of politics and performance and thus interrogates a particular political moment, including the particular set of social relations that inevitably emerge in that particular moment. Paradoxically, the political moment that is itself reflected in performance somehow necessitates or, at the least, allows its own interrogation. In other words, the key to understanding epic theater is to acknowledge its temporal and cultural specificity: epic theater historicizes events and attitudes specific to a particular sociopolitical situation in order to expose the power structures at work within that culture. In this sense, epic theater, as an area of study in Performance Studies is also situated as a microcosm of the field of Cultural Studies, for Cultural Studies, too, seeks the same end.

The work of the contemporary epic theater begins with the playwright; theater scholar, Janelle Reinelt, explains that “[t]he play needs some gesture to the power of social and political organizing; that is, we need to see the social environment, ranges, background, mode of production (“Notes on *Angels in America*” 243). Reinelt, in “Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater,” isolates the characteristics that must exist in order for a play (in this case, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*) to claim the title “epic”:

This is an epic play *if* the spectators engage the problems and understand the constraints operating on the nation and on themselves as social subjects. It is an epic play *if* some sense of what might be done next is

suggested but not spelled out. It is an epic play *if* it does not let spectators off the hook by allowing too much psychological investment in particular characters or too much good feeling of resolution at the end. (italics in the original) (236)

Contemporary theater of testimony in the United States engages numerous social issues, and, in so doing, confronts audience members and seeks to jolt them out of their complacency. As I noted previously, theater of testimony playwrights examine such issues as race relations, genocide, homophobia, class inequity, the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, the criminal justice system, post traumatic stress syndrome, hate crime, war, transgenderism, religion, poverty, and violence.

The Federal Theatre Project's Influence on Theater of Testimony

The earliest example of epic theater in the United States – and a model of much of the contemporary theater of testimony performance I outline in the next section – is found in the work of the Federal Theatre Project, a government relief program for unemployed theater workers established by the Works Project Administration in 1935. From 1935-1939, the Federal Theatre Project produced a wide variety of plays, from classics such as *Macbeth* and *Lysistrata* to experimental, documentary-style plays with socially relevant themes. These latter experimental plays, which dealt with the social issues of the Depression era United States – poverty, unemployment, labor, racism, health care, energy, and agriculture – exemplified the epic form. Dubbed "Living Newspapers," the productions incorporated Brechtian techniques in dramatic structure, political intent, and technical elements of lighting, sound, and scenic design.

As John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown explain in *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project*,

The living newspaper was a new dramatic form – a committed documentary that informed the audience of the size, nature, and origin of a social problem, and then called for specific action to solve it. . . . Each play was thoroughly documented, but they did have an editorial slant: personal problems were caused by social conditions; the lack of housing, food, or electricity was the result of a private enterprise system that exploited human needs. Most of the plays ended with exhortations demanding specific legislative or judicial action. (10-12)

The Living Newspaper plays, including the three summarized below, *Injunction Granted*, *Power*, and *Triple-A Plowed Under*, were created collaboratively by journalists and theater personnel (O'Connor and Brown 10). In the scripts, documentary materials and fictional characters are woven together in a series of short, episodic scenes juxtaposed with technical effects that bombarded the audience in true Brechtian form. Each play presents the history of the social problem it addresses, shows the struggles of the common person, establishes capitalism as the crux of the problem, and empowers the common person to fight the system. Each builds to a climactic finale with droves of people on stage – an extravagant, powerful ending designed to rally the citizen-audience to fight for justice.

The Living Newspaper plays incorporated Piscator's technical innovations; for example, designers used "[p]rojections, masks, spotlights, loudspeakers, ramps, and

characters in the audience . . . to force the facts upon the audience in an unforgettable fashion” (O’Connor and Brown 10). In *Injunction Granted*, *Power*, and *Triple-A Plowed Under*, the use of a bare stage, often with scene columns, ramps and platforms, was combined with numerous lighting and sound effects to suggest various locales. Often, the playwrights chose to represent a particular location metaphorically; one such example is the use of a boxing ring in *Injunction Granted* to show the contentiousness in the court case between Dean S. Jennings and William Randolph Hearst. Projections (both still and moving pictures), scrims, backdrops, banners, signs, placards, headlines from newspapers, and other documents enabled playwrights to place their message squarely in front of the audience. In true Brechtian form, the actions of the government are “made strange” to common citizens in an effort to spur them to take action.

Numerous lighting effects created both focus for the action and atmosphere for the scenes within the Living Newspaper plays. Special effects included the frequent use of spotlights to isolate a character or to divide the focus on stage into distinct areas, colored lights to indicate fire and chaos, flashing lights to indicate explosions, and slowly dimming lights or blackouts for emphasis.

Sound effects, too, were used liberally to highlight critical moments in the play. For example, a drumbeat followed the dialogue in Scene 7 of *Injunction Granted*, emphasizing the gravity of the Justice’s decision on behalf of Labor. Loudspeaker announcements were common, too, as in Act 1, Scene 15 of *Power*. At the top of the scene the announcement sets the stage for the scene in the Tennessee Valley in 1933, a farmer and his wife reading by kerosene lamp, discussing the lack of rural electrification.

On occasion, music underscores the action, as in Scene 7 in *Triple-A Plowed Under*: the stage directions indicate that “[d]uring darkness following Scene 6, cries of ‘Strike’ have given way to an ominous musical undercurrent. Throughout this scene, music continues, highlighting the climaxes, but at no time becoming more than a background.” One of the most frequent uses of sound in all of these scripts is created neither with an orchestra nor electronically but with the actors' voices. Chanting, echoing, repetition, shouting, and choral response occur frequently in the script, building scenes to a moment of climax and/or crisis. These Living Newspapers remain as exemplars of United States epic theater because of both the unique sociopolitical contexts of their creation and their innovative production effects, techniques that are now the norm in much contemporary theater of testimony performance.

Theater of Testimony

It is to an examination of theater of testimony as a unique form of epic theater in the United States that we now turn. Theater of testimony playwrights create plays primarily from the narratives of real people whom they interview, although scripts may also include elements common in the Living Newspaper plays: excerpts from primary documents, such as newspapers, diaries, letters, participant observers' field notes, court transcripts, media footage, and other texts. Theater of testimony productions, as exemplars of the epic form discussed above, examine contemporary social issues as they challenge audience members to confront their own existing cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

A brief note about terminology: there are numerous documentary theater forms in the United States today that share some of the characteristics of theater of testimony,

including ethnodrama, docudrama, documentary theater, public voice ethnography, personal narrative performance, autoethnographic performance, and theater of fact, just to name a few. However, it is the verbatim nature of theater of testimony – in fact, the term “verbatim theater” is another and highly relevant term used interchangeably in the literature – that sets it apart from other forms of documentary theater:

[V]erbatim theater largely draws upon *verbatim* recordings of interviews or eyewitness accounts of historic events. Proponents of the form consider that it is the *verbatim nature* of the presentations themselves which lends meaningful authority, import and significance to the resulting realizations. (italics in the original) (Mienczakowski, “Ethnodrama: Performed” 469)

I have chosen to use the term “theater of testimony” instead of “verbatim theater” (or other options as noted above) for several reasons: its meaning in the literature is fairly well agreed upon and established; the term “testimony” profoundly privileges and honors the experiences of interviewees, more so than the more clinical-sounding “verbatim”; and the phrase “theater of testimony” reflects the basic tenets of *testimonio*, a form of transcribed “life history” developed in Latin America.

William Tierney, author of “Undaunted Courage: Life History and the Postmodern Challenge,” explains that in *testimonio* a single narrator, a person who is most often a member of a marginalized community, “bears witness to a social urgency” with the hope that his or her testimony will motivate the reader to action on behalf of the community for whom the person speaks (297). Because the people who testify are often people who are functionally illiterate or, if literate, do not have access to publishers, a

testimonio is usually told to an “interlocutor” who is an ethnographer, journalist, or professional author (Beverley 320). John Beverley, author of “Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority,” explains that “the predominant formal aspect of the *testimonio* is the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an I that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention” (320-321). This urgency – this demand that someone listen– characterizes contemporary theater of testimony performance in the United States. And, as the playwrights discussed below are quick to point out, those who listen and see the performance are also obligated to act, a Brechtian goal that *testimonio* and theater of testimony share.

Christopher Bigsby, author of *Contemporary American Playwrights*, provides an eloquent description of the obligations and challenges facing theater of testimony playwrights. While Bigsby considers the work of Emily Mann, the playwright who pioneered the genre in the United States, his words apply to all those working in the form today:

Emily Mann is the author of plays which engage history through offering testimonies to the nature and crushing power of that history. Largely through the words of those who observed and suffered, she seeks to stage the reality of our century, alive to the ambiguity of the exercise and yet necessarily submitting to it. Hers is an uneasy art. She stares into the heart of darkness, aware that the light she seeks to shine there may falsify the profundity of that darkness and that the mere act of presentation may diminish the enormity of what she seeks to encompass. The result is an art

whose own methodology is as fraught with moral complexities as the world which that methodology is designed to capture. (132)

While Bigsby describes the artistic process of Emily Mann, playwright, director, and Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre, his description also reflects the work of Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project, Anna Deavere Smith, Marc Wolf, Leigh Fondakowski, and numerous other theater of testimony playwrights. In Bigsby's description we find allusions to theater of testimony's most prominent, and potentially problematic, defining characteristics: a privileging of testimony – of testimony that engages troubling aspects of a community's history; a commitment to representing the truths of those who testify; and an acknowledgement that the staging of such testimonies may minimize the significance of those experiences and, thereby, unwittingly dishonor the stories of those who speak.

With so many challenges, why then, are Emily Mann and her contemporaries committed to the form? Athol Fugard, in the introduction to *Testimonies*, an anthology of Mann's plays, offers one explanation: the awesome potential of the theater to “bear witness” to the dark periods in a nation's history by sharing the stories of individuals who were a part of that history. Fugard, after seeing a production in South Africa in 1983 of Mann's *Still Life*, a compelling play about the devastating effects of the Vietnam War not only on soldiers but on entire communities, related a conversation he had with Barney Simon, the play's director:

In talking about Mann's work [Simon] used the word “testimony” several times – I made him check its dictionary definition: “To bear witness”

according to the *OED* A perfect definition of the challenge [South Africa's] theatre faces at this moment in our country's history. . . . Barney became very worked-up: "We can't be silent! We must give evidence! We are witnesses!" He said Mann's work had been a great provocation to him and had revitalized his sense of theatre's role in a time of crisis. (ix-x)

Mann, in an interview in *Women Who Write Plays*, credits Simon, co-founder of the Market Theater of Johannesburg with "dubb[ing] the plays Theater of Testimony, because in South Africa, they come out of that tradition" (Greene 291). And, indeed, as demonstrated in the examples to follow, Emily Mann and her contemporaries testify – through the words of individuals whom they've interviewed – to the dark, complex, and often incomprehensible experiences of our times.

Mann is drawn to the form because it allows her to present a "huge spectrum" of responses to traumatic public events. She explains that she is "always interested in getting [numerous] viewpoints, because by doing that, [one] might get close to what's really going on" (Greene 294). For her, theater of testimony provides a space for audience members to reflect on important moments in our country's history: "There's a conversation going on between the actors and the audience. And hopefully it shakes you up enough, or stimulates or moves you enough, so that when you walk out you are continuing the conversation" (Greene 287). Mann – and other theater of testimony playwrights discussed below – relies on the private conversations of those she interviews to foreground the public conversation.

For example, in *Execution of Justice*, Mann presents more than forty people's perspectives drawn from dozens of interviews she conducted throughout the San Francisco community. For Mann, the outrage following the verdict was a testament to the idea that San Francisco itself was a "city on trial," one whose silenced citizens needed the opportunity to bear witness and tell their stories. In creating the script, in addition to citizens' voices, Mann also relied heavily on court documents, excerpts from a film by Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen entitled *The Times of Harvey Milk*, local news broadcasts about the murders, and the "political will" left by Milk himself (Bigsby 157). As noted earlier, Mann incorporated in the playscript many of the epic theater's distancing techniques pioneered in the United States in the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers: projected scene titles, direct address, musical underscoring, still and moving images, such as the distraught voice of Dianne Feinstein who succeeded Moscone as Mayor, the amplified sound of a judge's gavel, the sounds of Dan White's wife's footsteps, abrupt changes in light, and crowd reactions to the events surrounding the murders and trial.

While the bulk of the script presents interviewees' words verbatim, she includes a few composite characters based on her interviews that serve as a sort of Greek chorus – people she refers to as "uncalled witnesses"; the characters, one of whom is described as "young mother, late 30's" (Mann 147) are "the embodiment of views and attitudes she encountered in her research" (Bigsby 155). In an interview with Alexis Greene, Mann describes the impetus for the Chorus of Uncalled Witnesses:

I hear lots of voices at once in my head, often. . . . They're answering each other even if they're not directly talking to each other. That happened in court in San Francisco, where these people who were not allowed into the court had to jump up and say "but but but but." That's the Chorus of Uncalled Witnesses in *Execution of Justice*. So they had to speak. (Greene 297)

The conversations (the majority of which are *not* composites) Mann and others construct in their plays (Mann emphasizes the "wright" of "playwright" – as in "honing and shaping" a piece) (Greene 296) are at the crux of the criticism leveled against theater of testimony and other documentary works. Bigsby contends that such works teeter between fact and art: by definition, Mann and other theater of testimony playwrights must contextualize for the stage the conversations they have had in private; that act of editing, of course, alters the original in profound – and, as Bigsby suggests, often not in necessarily good – ways. The playwright's influence begins in the interview process, for the playwright selects interviewees and formulates the questions she poses following what Bigsby refers to as a "frame of her own devising," noting that even "[t]he conversation itself has a template" (134). Later, after the playscript is created and the presentation is staged, "[p]rivate conversation becomes public event, confidences are breached, and even though they are so with the sanction of those who offered them, there is a subtle shift in pressure, moral no less than social" (133). Bigsby's concern that the "mere act of presentation may diminish the enormity of what [the playwright] seeks to

encompass” (132), while shared by some critics of documentary theater forms, does not, in my mind, outweigh the enormous social and political potential of such works.

Geoff Pywell, author of *Staging Real Things: The Performance of Ordinary Events*, addresses a somewhat different conundrum that staging “the real” presents to theater-goers. Like Bigsby, Pywell argues that staging an experience alters the original experience; unlike Bigsby, however, Pywell claims that the performed event or experience becomes elevated in our minds as “substantially different” from the original. While Bigsby is concerned that the staging of factual events runs the risk of minimizing the event itself or the testimonies of those who experienced it, Pywell argues that productions in which the “aesthetic and the actual” overlap possess a particular allure: such productions allow “this abeyance of real and illusion, this shivering of the perceptions, to trigger a new witnessing of the human self” (39).

Such concerns, and their accompanying moral and psychological tensions, are not unique to theater of testimony artists; they confront documentarians working in other forms such as film, photography, and non-fiction. Robert Coles, author of *Doing Documentary Work*, states that documentarians should be cognizant of the many “questions that confront us explicitly or by implication as we who take stock of others also try to live our own lives with some self-respect” (49). Coles encourages documentarians to be self-reflective, to consider carefully “our responsibilities to those with whom we come to spend our time, to whom we pose questions, or whom we ask to pose while we go click, click, click . . .” (74). Coles’ reminder is especially apt given that most theater of testimony works examine emotionally charged topics; it follows that often

interviewees are asked to recount experiences that are emotionally painful to revisit, memories that perhaps they have repressed.

As a rule, theater of testimony artists do not take Coles' charge lightly. For example, consider the process undertaken by members of the Atlanta-based Synchronicity Performance Group in preparation for an original work entitled *Women + War*, a theater of testimony piece centered on "how war touches the lives of women," most particularly women living in the Atlanta area. Mollie Wilson, author of an article in *American Theatre*, "Beyond *Lysistrata*," explains:

Before the fieldwork [of interviewing] began, documentary filmmaker Carol Cassidy led the artists in interview workshops, teaching them to listen effectively and allow the interviewees to control the exchange. In order to give them as much control as possible . . . the subjects could choose how their words were recorded (video or just audio), how or whether the recording and transcription might be used and archived, whether their actual names would be used, and so on. (29-30)

Perhaps most importantly, company members assured the women interviewees that they could withdraw any of the stories they'd shared, in whole or in part, as they wished. One of the co-producing artistic directors of the production, Rachel May, remarked that the process led to "very generous storytelling" (Wilson 30), which, in turn, contributed to a compellingly honest and powerful playscript.

Like the Synchronicity artists, the overwhelming majority of theater of testimony playwrights spends extensive amounts of time and energy interviewing dozens,

sometimes hundreds, of people connected to the experience or event to be staged before crafting the playscript itself. Playwrights are careful to invite people with widely differing perspectives to participate in interviews, often relying on initial interviewees and community groups to introduce them to others. For example, the artists in the Synchronicity Performance Group relied on Refugee Family Services to introduce them to women refugees for their *Women + War* production. With the organization's help, actor-playwrights met and interviewed women from many countries, including Bosnia, Colombia, Sudan, Somalia, and Vietnam; they also interviewed anti-war protestors, humanitarian aid workers, and women who worked in factories that manufactured combat boots, among others. Too, Synchronicity artists interviewed members of their own families and those family members introduced them to still other women whose stories needed to be told (Wilson 29). By interviewing so many women, the company "hoped to demonstrate both the variety of women's experiences with war and the common emotional responses to conflict and loss that exist across cultures" (Wilson 28).

Synchronicity's extensive interview process and its goal of allowing audience members to view a situation through more than one lens mirror those of other theater of testimony writers. One other common feature shared by these playwrights is the acknowledgement that while much of the material gathered in interviews is omitted from the final playscript, the interview process, in and of itself, is valuable to the playwright. For example, Marc Wolf, inspired by the process playwright-actor-scholar Anna Deavere Smith incorporates in producing her one-woman shows, interviewed one hundred fifty men and women before crafting the sixteen monologues presented in *Another American*:

Asking and Telling, his play about the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy (Eustis). As a gay man opposed to the policy, Wolf explains that the interview process allowed him to see other viewpoints. In describing his response to an interview he conducted with a colonel, Wolf explained, "That guy was incredibly convincing. . . . I walked out of that interview thinking, 'You know what, he's right. Gay people can't serve in the military right now.' And then I'd talk to someone else, and my mind would change" (Eustis).

Wolf performed each of the characters in the original 1998 production, including "sociologists, professors, activists, politicians, and, of course, veterans and active-duty military personnel from World War II to the present" (Lemon). The variety of voices included in the production prevented the production from becoming biased, as Wolf explains in an article in *The Advocate*:

The evening is an exploration of how America has confronted the issue of gays and lesbians in the military. . . . And I think some people who come to see it expect a one-sided, preachy point of view. When they realize that the play presents a variety of voices, they're not always happy. (Lemon)

Another challenge faces those who write documentary works as opposed to fiction: the audience comes to the production with some knowledge (albeit often limited to "sound bites") of the public history underlying the private stories presented on stage. No matter what is said or not said on stage, there is much that is known at the outset of the production, knowledge that differs from person to person and influences each person's response to the play. An example of a play with just such a "public history" is *The Laramie Project*, Moisés Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project's play about the

brutal murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard in 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming. While Shepard was in the hospital, unconscious and barely alive, the country and the world were riveted to their television sets, keeping vigil until his death. At the same time, viewers witnessed legislators debate hate crime legislation and anti-gay groups continue to proclaim their message of hate, going so far as to show up at Matthew Shepard's funeral with placards denouncing homosexuality.

Audiences who later saw the play brought that "public history" to the theater with them in addition to their own private response to the events. Bigsby asserts, "Our awareness that we are dealing with fact rather than fiction freights our response with pity, guilt, horror, despair which may or may not be generated by the play in isolation. Audiences are confronted with a double truth: this really happened and this is being simulated. . . . This is fact; this is fiction" (134-135). Bigsby's concern is with the moral implications of staging the difficult truths of a nation. He argues that because "[i]t is not hard to move audiences" (135) theater of testimony playwrights must guard against allowing their aesthetic choices to dilute a harder truth.

In discussing a television series about the Holocaust, for example, Bigsby describes a scene in which the director's inclusion of a slow motion effect negates the awful truth of what happened in the death camps: "What was designed to amplify the stark facts of genocide transfers them from the realm of fact to that of aesthetics and the audience's response becomes ambiguous. Facts and art coexist uneasily, while truth may be something quite apart" (132-33). Of course, one might argue that Bigsby's remarks simply indicate his mistrust of the audience's ability to interpret the aesthetic act.

Hayden White, author of *Figural Realism*, also considers the relationship of fact and art in his chapter “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Historical Truth in Historical Representation.” He argues that there are some topics – and he uses the example of the Holocaust as well – that should not be addressed in narrative “story” form, for in so doing, the magnitude of the event is compromised. He argues that for such unspeakable events, a detached chronicle of facts that does not seek to comment or reflect upon the subject is required. He cautions that when an account is presented in a narrative form (whether epic, tragic, farcical, comic, romantic, pastoral, etc.), “not so much another, more comprehensive and synthetic factual statement [has been produced], but an interpretation of the facts” (29). The danger White presents rests on the assumption that narrative histories are presumed to be factual – not commentaries on the facts. While both Bigsby and White’s concerns may have some validity, we must remember that of the many significant theater of testimony playwrights working today none claim to present objective truth, nor do they seek a comprehensive truth, but many truths, especially those offered by people traditionally denied the opportunity to speak.

For example, in creating *The Laramie Project*, Moisés Kaufman and a small group of Tectonic actors interviewed nearly two hundred people over a period of two years, including college professors, friends of the two murderers, government officials, prosecutors, clergy members, close friends of Shepard, medical staff, a taxi driver, gay advocates, anti-gay protestors, and the bicyclist who found Matthew Shepard tied to a fence in a field outside Laramie. The play presents the views of more than sixty interviewees – as well as the “journal entries” of many of the interviewers – as a

testament to the complexity of responses not only to Shepard's senseless killing by two of Laramie's own young men but to a community's attitude toward homosexuality as well.

Robert Brustein, writing in *The New Republic*, observes that most of the voices presented in the play are tolerant:

Still, most of them – except for a few anti-gay fanatics, one of whom carries a placard reading “God hates fags” – are tolerant of homosexuals.

A hundred people march on behalf of Matthew Shepard wearing yellow armbands. Others wave placards reading “Peace and Love.” And although one angry lesbian demands the death penalty for Matthew's killers, his father asks clemency for them, and they get it: life imprisonment. (29-30)

Kaufman's project provides the means by which a community – and a nation of theatergoers who saw and will see *The Laramie Project* – can record their impressions, concerns, and fears about a tragic incident in our country's history.

Similarly, Anna Deavere Smith, author of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a play about the brutal beating of Rodney King by police officers and the subsequent riots in the city following the officers' acquittals, describes her work in that project as the “search for the character of Los Angeles in the wake of the initial Rodney King verdict” (“*Twilight Los Angeles: The Shades of Loss*”). Smith uses her position as playwright and actor (she writes and performs the monologues in one-woman shows) to allow audience members to participate in a public conversation; in *Twilight* the conversation focuses on the multiple attitudes toward race relations in Los Angeles and, by extension, the country as a whole. In researching the play Smith collected taped interviews with dozens of people from the

community, edited the interviews, and later compiled them into a series of monologues. She explains that “*Twilight* is a document of what I, as an actress, heard in Los Angeles. In creating a ‘social drama,’ I am not proposing a specific solution to social problems. I turn that over to activists, scholars, legislators, and most importantly, to you, the audience” (“*Twilight Los Angeles: The Shades of Loss*”).

In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, Smith explores the racial tensions between Hasidic Jews and African Americans in Crown Heights. Tensions escalated when a young Caribbean-American boy, Gavin Cato, was killed when he was run over by a car in a rabbi’s motorcade; in retaliation, African Americans murdered a Jewish student. David Savran, author of *The Playwright’s Voice*, describes Smith’s artistic process and her resultant work:

Having interviewed most of the principals (and many others) whose opinions and points of view both dispute the chain of events and illuminate what is at stake in Crown Heights, she lets these contestants, in effect, sit down and talk with each other for the first time. By focusing on the deployment of language by each of her subjects – the avowals, evasions and circumlocutions – she holds a mirror up to the persons and the events, foregrounding the powerful, and indeed tragic, emotions produced in all those affected by the double homicide and the relationship between these emotions and the uneasy coexistence of two radically dissimilar cultures on the same streets. (238-239)

As with *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith asks audience members to participate in a public conversation; again, we are brought to the table by the testimonies of private citizens. As we listen, we sense that the cultural landscape is perhaps more complex than we initially imagined. By seeing through the eyes of others, our vision expands, and we come to understand that our conclusions about the society in which we live are perhaps provisional at best, for, as Savran suggests, we exist in an America that, as mirrored in the multitude of characters Smith presents, is “very much in process” (239). The challenge Smith and others face is to craft a performance text that honors the stories shared, presents the myriad of truths offered by the participants without intrusive interpretation or comment, creates a space for ongoing critical dialogue with audience members, provides a space for multiple voices to be heard, maintains the dignity of all participants, and possesses aesthetic and literary integrity.⁵ A tall order indeed.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony Performance

Finally, I conclude my discussion in this chapter with a definition of the particular type of theater of testimony performance that serves as the basis of my analysis of critical performance pedagogy in subsequent chapters.

I am indebted to the work of folklorist Elaine Lawless and ethnographer Luke E. Lassiter (and others) whose work in reciprocal ethnography and collaborative ethnography, respectively, provided a model – and the terminology (as, to my knowledge, none exists in the theater literature) – for the type of theater of testimony performance I am exploring. Lawless uses the term “reciprocal ethnography” to describe the fieldwork

techniques she employed in her study of the lives of ten women ministers, all of whom served in Protestant churches in the upper Midwest.

Lawless describes the approach as “inherently feminist and humanistic,” explaining that it “takes ‘reflexive anthropology’ one step further by foregrounding dialogue as a process in understanding and knowledge retrieval” (5). Lawless views the approach as feminist because it stresses an equal relationship between herself and the women she is studying – the researcher is not “at some apex of knowledge and understanding and her ‘subjects’ in some inferior, less knowledgeable position” (5). For Lawless, respect for and dialogue with participants is the key to illuminating their stories; as she states in the introduction to her 1993 ethnography, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, “Along with this respect has come a recognition that they *know* things that I, as a scholar, do not necessarily need to ‘interpret’ but am obliged to present” (4). Similarly, theater of testimony playwrights working collaboratively recognize and respect the power and intelligence of their subjects and engage in continual dialogue with them throughout the process of creating the performance piece, from initial interviews through closing night.

Lawless explains that the reciprocal relationship between researcher and subjects continues throughout the creation of the ethnographic text. As the author/scholar, Lawless does not strive to analyze or interpret the lives of the women ministers, but rather to present their voices “solo at times” and, at other times, interwoven with her own voice as author. In *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, Lawless developed a text that she acknowledges “represents shared authorship, not of the actual words on the page and their representation to a potential reader, but in the development and consensus of our

evolving discourse” (4). Similarly, a playwright working in a collaborative theater of testimony project works closely with subjects to ensure that they play an integral role in how they are represented in the playscript and, subsequently, onstage.

Luke Lassiter, in *The Power of Kiowa Song*, his 1998 ethnography based on his experiences living among the Kiowa in southwestern Oklahoma, emphasizes the role of collaboration with subjects (Lassiter prefers the term “consultants”) in fieldwork practices, during the writing stage, and beyond. Lassiter, acknowledging a debt to Lawless’s earlier work, explains that what he prefers to call “collaborative ethnography” differs from “traditional ethnographic practice in its focus on the dialogues between ethnographer and consultants to initially craft and continuously rework the ethnographic text itself” (11). Moving a step further from conventional ethnographic practice, wherein the text is often seen as the ending point of the ethnographic process, Lassiter suggests that even after the text has been developed and published, it is more like a work in process than a definitive text; consultants and ethnographers continue to negotiate the issues presented in the text, discussions that often lead to other articles and texts that constitute an ongoing conversation.

In *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, Lassiter provides a rich overview of collaborative ethnography’s historical and theoretical roots. The text is also a practical manual for aspiring ethnographers who want to engage in a “deliberate and explicit collaborative ethnography.” Lassiter’s guidelines are equally relevant for performance practitioners who seek a similar goal through theater of testimony

performance. Lassiter states plainly that “[a] deliberate and explicit collaborative ethnography is founded on four main commitments:

1. ethical and moral responsibility to consultants;
2. honesty about fieldwork process;
3. accessible and dialogic writing; and
4. collaborative reading, writing, and co-interpretation of ethnographic texts with consultants” (77).

For the directors, consultants, and performers collaborating in a theater of testimony performance, Lassiter’s discussion in the final section of *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, “Collaborative Ethnography, Collaborative Action,” is intensely relevant. I have highlighted throughout this chapter the overtly political intent of theater of testimony performance. Lassiter, similarly, recognizes that ethnographers working in traditional ways have long had the opportunity to “extend their research practice into activism or public practice” (152) and many have seized that opportunity. He asserts, though, that “*collaborative* ethnography almost always *necessitates* this extension of research into action on some level” (italics added, 152). It follows that a collaborative theater of testimony project could necessitate a similar end, thereby enhancing the potential of the performance. Lassiter observes that

[c]ollaborative ethnography . . . has the potential to present us with a continuum of action from the co-construction of texts to the co-conception of community-based initiatives. . . . [C]ollaboratively built texts also have potential for establishing other kinds of action in the local communities in

which we do research. Collaborative ethnography challenges the authority not only of the single-authored text, but also of the single-voiced activist, and it forges a “co-activism” in much more complex, diverse, and multivocal ways (Schensul and Stern 1985). Such collaborative action, from text to praxis, thus blurs the lines between academic and community discourse, between academic and applied anthropology, between theory and practice, and it places collaborative ethnography among the many kinds of public and activist efforts that have long abounded in our field. (153-154)

Substitute “collaborative theater of testimony” for “collaborative ethnography,” and “performances” for “texts,” and one finds a strong argument for advocating a collaborative model in theater of testimony performance.

In what I am calling “collaborative theater of testimony performance” at least two possible scenarios exist. In one, the most common practice, either an individual ethnographer/director or several theater company members interview, over several months or years, community members whose stories they will eventually perform on stage. The interviewees often collaborate with the theater practitioners in script development as well, and may offer feedback during workshops and previews of the piece. An example of working this way is exemplified in the creation of the original productions of *The Laramie Project*, *Women + War*, *Another American: Asking and Telling*, *Fires in the Mirror*, and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. In effect, in each of the productions cited above, the theater company members – or in the case of Smith and

Wolf, the solo actor-playwright – served as ethnographers, dramaturgs, script developers, and actors.

In Chapter Three, I offer excerpts of interviews that I conducted with Tectonic Theater Project member Kelli Simpkins, a professional actor who was involved in the original productions of both *The Laramie Project* and another theater of testimony production, *The People's Temple*, based on interviews with survivors and relatives of people who died in the Peoples Temple mass murder-suicides at Jonestown in 1978. In both projects, Simpkins interviewed community members, participated in script development workshops, and acted in the original productions.

In a second scenario, community members from two different communities (who may or may not have theater experience) collaborate in all facets of a theater of testimony production and are, themselves, the subject of the piece. Facilitated by a director and/or ethnographer, participants from each community offer their own testimony in their own voices, share in the script's development, and participate in the performance, thus maintaining control throughout the process over the material they present to the audience. In some cases, participants perform their own words; at other times, they present the words of their fellow actors. An example of this sort of collaborative work is a production I facilitated with students at Hampden-Sydney College and inmates at Piedmont Regional Jail in Farmville, Virginia. I discuss this collaborative theater of testimony project, entitled *Committed*, in detail in Chapter Four.

My primary concern in investigating collaborative theater of testimony is with the shared experience of participants both during the early phases of interviewing and

discussion and in the later stages of text development, rehearsal and performance – their interactions, self-discoveries, and new knowledge gained through their collaboration. I am also interested in how collaborative theater of testimony performance can influence audience members’ attitudes, perceptions about difference, and future actions.

In essence, I intend to examine the ways in which performance serves as a method of inquiry – as a way of knowing, or, stated another way, as “critical performance pedagogy” – for those involved in collaborative theater of testimony work. Elyse Pineau, author of “Performance Studies Across the Curriculum: Problems, Possibilities, and Projections,” defines critical performance pedagogy as “the fusion of critical pedagogy and performance praxis” (130), a pedagogy that links embodied learning and theatrical production. In the next chapter I provide a review of relevant literature concerning this pedagogy, in preparation for an analysis of critical performance pedagogy in two case studies, my own work with college students in *Committed* and the work of professional actor Kelli Simpkins in both *The Laramie Project* and *The People’s Temple*.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY

“The body believes what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, brings it back to life. What is ‘learned by body’ is not what one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something one is.” (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 73)

In Chapter One, I presented the views of scholars and theater practitioners who argue that theater of testimony is a critical form of theatrical production: by its very nature of “bearing witness” to the lives of individuals and the social issues their stories reflect, it challenges audience members to rethink their prevailing views and, whether subtly or overtly, either nudges or demands that audience members advocate for some sort of change. In a sense, too, theater of testimony can be considered a specific type of pedagogy – it strives to teach – to impart knowledge of a particular sort.

This instructive potential of theater of testimony is grounded foremost in the subject matter of the playscript itself; for example, upon an initial reading of *Execution of Justice*, a reader learns about the corruption surrounding Dan White’s trial for the murders of Harvey Milk and George Moscone. The reader need not attend a production of the play for her awareness to be broadened – she can, alone, read and ponder the script, construct her version of the performed play in her head, and consider the issues that Emily Mann proffers. But, that said, theater and performance studies scholars argue that there is something about the “liveness” of the communal theater event that heightens audience members’ awareness and attention; performance scholars also point to the

potential of performance to transform the consciousness of both those who perform, the actors, and those whose stories are performed, the subjects. The theory behind why this transformative potential exists is the focus of this chapter on critical performance pedagogy.

In the Introduction, I explained Conquergood's assertion that performance studies operates along three "crisscrossing lines of activity and analysis": imagination, inquiry, and intervention. The first strand, performance as an activity of the imagination, points to the theatrical event itself, that is, any creative work presented on a stage or in a non-traditional theater setting such as a street corner or warehouse.

It is to the second strand that we now turn – performance as a method of inquiry – as a way of knowing. It is in this strand of performance that we enter the realm of performance theory. Simply stated, scholars argue that as a method of inquiry, performance allows participants in the theatrical event to gain new understanding about themselves, others, and their culture in a way that traditional scholarly research does not or may not allow.

As I noted in the conclusion of Chapter One, Elyse Pineau defines critical performance pedagogy as "the fusion of critical pedagogy and performance praxis." In short, it is a pedagogy that seeks transformation and/or social action (the "critical" aim) through – to use Conquergood's definition of performance praxis – a process that involves "multiple ways of knowing that engage embodied experience with critical reflection" ("Of Caravans").

Critical performance pedagogy evolves from the tradition of critical theory, what ethnographer Jim Thomas describes as “a tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge” (qtd. in Madison, *Critical Ethnography* 18). Following Thomas, communication, cultural, and performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison describes the aims of performance-based researchers who employ critical theory in their analyses:

to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt. (*Critical Ethnography* 13)

With these aims in mind, Madison reasons, following Kinchloe and McLaren, that critical ethnography can productively be viewed as “critical theory in action” (*Critical Ethnography* 13). As we will see in the discussion that follows, Madison’s claim, with just a bit of tweaking, engenders an analogous claim for the purpose of this study: collaborative theater of testimony performance can be viewed as critical performance pedagogy in action.

Conquergood, in “Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies in Motion,” writes that he and his colleagues at Northwestern, one of the preeminent performance studies programs in the country, “believe that theory is enlivened and most rigorously

tested when it hits the ground in practice. Likewise, we believe that artistic practice can be deepened, complicated, and challenged in meaningful ways by engaging critical theory.” For our purposes, collaborative theater of testimony performance is the performance practice under investigation; my aim is to discover to what extent this artistic practice can be enriched for all constituents – subjects, audiences, and performers – by engaging the theory/ theories of critical performance pedagogy.

Because of its potential as a teaching strategy, Pineau contends that critical performance pedagogy should be integrated in courses across the curriculum, a compelling argument worthy of investigation to be sure, but one that falls outside the intent of this study. However, an extrapolation from her call for the application of critical performance pedagogy in the classroom allows an argument for critical performance pedagogy in the theater itself – an argument central to my own; that is, that collaborative theater of testimony performance provides participants with an optimal situation in which to examine their own attitudes and beliefs, to confront social issues, to engage with the worlds of others, and to disrupt and challenge socially constructed perceptions of difference.

While the conventional use of the phrase “critical performance pedagogy” applies to students and actors who embody an other, in the discussion to follow, I will expand its application to subjects and audience members who participate in the theatrical experience. First, however, an explanation of critical performance pedagogy in its conventional sense is in order: Pineau attests that performance can be utilized to enhance learning and that such a pedagogical approach “requires the vigorous, systematic,

exploration-through-enactment of real and imagined experience in which learning occurs through sensory awareness and kinesthetic engagement” (“Performance Studies” 132-133).

In other words, a performance methodology suggests an experiential learning situation in which students “struggle bodily” (133) with the curriculum in a given course. The key concept that makes this pedagogical practice different from simple role playing or other forms of experiential education is the reflexivity of the performer, as Pineau explains:

Performance methodology describes a deliberate act, a self-conscious act, an act which requires students to think about how and why their bodies are behaving in the ways that they are. Performance is a method of reflective enactment as much as it is one of physical action and therein lies its critical potential. Critical performative pedagogy combines acute physical awareness of one’s kinetic and kinesthetic senses with candid and thoughtful consideration of the implication of those body sensations. Every time that we ask students to perform across gender, ethnic, or generational lines we have the opportunity to unpack their resistance to the unfamiliar, their stereotypic assumptions about how others move through the world, as well as to confront their own habituated responses and experiences. (133)

Might such potential exist *outside* the traditional classroom? When actors in a given production (either professional or nonprofessional) embody a character seemingly

quite different from themselves, would their own character development practices, which are, by necessity, self-reflexive, lead them to “unpack their resistance to the unfamiliar” and discover “how others move through the world”? When audience members share in this embodied experience – as co-constructors of meaning in the theatrical event – do they have similar experiences as actors? Can performance practices transform communities? Prompt dialogue? Heal a hurting community? Can subjects benefit by seeing themselves embodied on stage? In the literature about performance-based “ways of knowing” (Stucky 143), scholars respond with a resounding “yes.”

Following, I offer a review of scholars’ discussions about how performance practices accomplish these critical ends, not only for performers but also for audience members and the people who are the subjects of a theater of testimony performance. This chapter thus serves as the theoretical underpinning for my discussion in later chapters in which I apply the principles of critical performance pedagogy to two collaborative theater of testimony case studies.

D. Soyini Madison’s “Performance of Possibilities”

Madison, a scholar whose teaching and research focus on performance ethnography and the performance of literature for social change (in addition to other topics), provides a lens through which we may consider critical performance pedagogy as it relates to theater of testimony performance. In *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, Madison considers the critical implications, both social and political, of staging fieldwork data (which would include the narratives, documents, and other materials woven into a

theater of testimony performance), viewing these implications from three perspectives: the subjects, the audience, and the performers.

For Madison, staging performances that portray the lives and social situations of real people engenders a “performance of possibilities,” a theatrical event that deems possible “a movement culminating in creation and change” (172). Madison poses several questions about the transformative potential of performance:

[The performance of possibilities] is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces. A performance of possibilities raises several questions for the ethnographer [or playwright and director in a theater of testimony performance]: By what definable and material means will the subjects themselves benefit from the performance? How can the performance contribute to a more enlightened and involved citizenship that will disturb systems and processes that limit freedoms and possibilities? In what ways will the performers probe questions of identity, representation, and fairness to enrich their own subjectivity, cultural politics, and art? (*Critical Ethnography* 172).

Weighty questions, indeed. We will examine the critical potential of performance in each of the three spheres noted above – subjects, audience members, and performers –

to create, to transform, to benefit, to enlighten, to challenge, to disturb, to probe, and to enrich the lives of individuals and their communities.

The Performance of Possibilities: Implications for Subjects

Many scholars note that the various forms of performance ethnography, including theater of testimony works, possess the potential to empower the subjects whose stories are performed, a process that Madison explores by examining “the arenas of voice, subjectivity, and interrogative field” (*Critical Ethnography* 172). For Madison, the term “voice” does not refer to the mere reiteration of the subject’s words; rather, “voice” refers to “the presentation of a historical self, a full presence that is in and of a particular world” (173). The performance of possibilities, Madison argues, demands that subjects are viewed as people with agency, as “makers of meaning, symbol, and history in their full sensory and social dimensions” (173). She writes that

[p]erforming subversive and subaltern voices proclaims existence, within particular locales and discourses, that are being witnessed – entered into one’s own experience – and this witnessing cannot be denied. The subjects themselves benefit from this proclamation through the creation of space that gives evidence not only that “I am here in the world among you,” but more importantly that “I am in the world under particular conditions that are constructed and thereby open to greater possibility.” (*Critical Ethnography* 173)

Langellier, a communication and performance studies scholar, agrees that proper contextualization of the subject’s situation is necessary for the performance to have

critical import. She suggests that rather than seeing personal narrative as simply one person's story, theater practitioners should strive to see the political in the personal – “the social, cultural, historical construction of difference” that personal narrative performances can illuminate (“Voiceless Bodies” 210). In so doing, theater practitioners accept the responsibility of presenting as accurately as possible the lives of subjects within their complex social and political circumstances. Christine Logan, author of “Improvisational Pedagogy,” in describing her work in the classroom, observes, “I’ve always in some form taught the social construction of reality (i.e. that reality and truth are constructed in communication) and intensively so in performance. For years, however, I stopped there. Now, I take another step and ask, ‘So what is it you want to construct?’” (184) Her question has import for playwrights, directors, and actors as they engage in the work of representing subjects onstage – we must be mindful of the subjects we construct, an ethical responsibility discussed in more detail in a later section.

For Madison, the acknowledgment of subjects in their particular circumstances is but the starting point in the triad of voice, subjectivity, and interrogative field that leads to the greatest benefit to subjects. The realization of true subjectivity requires that we “move beyond the *acknowledgement* of voice within experience to that of *actual engagement*” (italics in the original) with the “material and discursive world of the Other” (*Critical Ethnography* 173-174). Madison explains that “[b]ecause subjectivity is formed through a range of discursive practices – economic, social, aesthetic, and political – and meanings are sites of creation and struggle, subjectivity linked to performance becomes a poetic and polemic admixture of personal experience, cultural politics, social

power, and resistance” (174). In other words, it is through the performance itself – at the point during which performers and audience connect with subjects’ lived experience – that “Others become subjects” (174).

One notable example of how subjects benefited through this engagement of performer and audience occurred in a performance in which student performers presented the personal narratives of cafeteria workers who, in 1968, went on strike in protest of poor working conditions and inadequate compensation for their labor at the University of North Carolina. The strike was wrought with tension: classes were cancelled and the National Guard and University police were called in to maintain order. It was an extremely difficult time for the striking workers, particularly for the two African American women who led the protest. As part of the University of North Carolina’s bicentennial celebration, faculty and students created a performance piece that both commemorated the contributions of the striking workers and honored the current campus laborers. Madison, who was instrumental in creating the production, writes that on opening night the strike leaders and other workers were “the honored guests with reserved seats before an overflowing crowd” (“Performance” 279).

In describing the 1993 production, Madison notes that after the show, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Brooks, the two workers who led the strike and whose stories were featured in the production, were introduced to the audience and welcomed with “a thunderous and lengthy standing ovation” (“Performance” 280). Mrs. Smith expressed that the idea that the performance event validated her struggle; too, her grandchildren expressed their respect for what she’d experienced. Madison writes that

It was the narratives of Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Brooks and the other workers “identifying themselves as subjects” and “telling their story” in the mediated space of performance that empowered them before strangers and kin. Performance proclaimed and affirmed who they were and how they were. Performance also proclaimed that what they did was noticed, appreciated, and that it made a difference. (“Performance” 280)

A similar sentiment was shared by one of the women whose story was told in the Synchronicity Performance Group’s production *Women + War*. After a Colombian woman whose brother was murdered watched the performance, she expressed conflicting emotions: “I felt again the same pain – it was really hard . . . [but] when I saw how [audience members] were impacted, I thought: That’s great – the next time you have to make a decision about violence, maybe you will think twice” (Wilson 87). This woman’s story mattered to others, and that in itself validated her own experiences.

Too, often when a person sees her own story presented on stage, she sees her own life circumstances anew. For example, Joan Didion recounts her experience in January 2007 when rehearsals began for a play that she wrote, her first, based upon her experiences following the death of her husband. Vanessa Redgrave was cast to portray Didion in the one-woman show. As opening night neared, Redgrave and Didion went to the Booth Theater where the play would be performed, and, as Didion explains, Redgrave moved “like a mermaid sensing water” to the stage and “began saying the play.” Upon seeing Redgrave speak Didion’s own words in rehearsal, Didion observed, “There it was:

Vanessa Redgrave was standing on a stage in an empty theater and she was telling me a story I was hearing for the first time” (Didion 7).

In a very different theatrical context – a collaborative theater of testimony performance piece created with inmates at a correctional institution in rural North Carolina – a remarkably similar revelation occurred. Alicia J. Rouveral, the oral history scholar who facilitated the work, argues that collaborative, or “reciprocal,” performance processes – in which interviewees and researchers share authority throughout the interview and creation process – can have positive impacts on subjects. For one inmate, rehearsing the lines of his own “script” (inmates portrayed themselves in the production), opened his eyes to his particular situation, as he related in a group interview, transcribed below:

The most thing I liked about developing the script was the responsibility Because at first I thought, “I just got caught. I wasn’t wrong. I was just someone who got caught.” Now as we started developing the script, I see where I messed up. . . . No, I was wrong, I have to take responsibility for what I did. And maybe that’s the most thing I liked about the script and telling my story. I made a mistake here. Now I see where the ripple effect and things started to go wrong for me And now, when you start reading that script: Now I can change, now I know where the problem was. I know what the problem is. Now I’ve got to go about solving it. (Rouveral)

Of course, there are performances in which the subjects are neither collaborators in the production nor are they physically present; they therefore do not have the

opportunity to benefit first hand from the performance in the ways described above. Madison argues that the greatest benefit to subjects emerges from the performance itself, regardless of the subjects' presence. If the performance is successful in compellingly presenting the subjects' worlds in their social and political contexts, then audience members are brought into what Madison describes as the interrogative field: "the point at which the *performance of possibilities* aims to create or contribute to a discursive space where unjust systems and processes are identified and interrogated" (italics in the original) ("Performance 280).

Madison's definition of the interrogative field points to the aims of theater of testimony performance that I described in Chapter One. Although the language used by performance studies scholars and theater of testimony playwrights, directors, and performers may differ, the underlying sentiment and commitment to the transformative potential of performance for subjects is the same. All would likely agree that "[t]he greatest benefit to Subjects is for those who bear witness to their stories to interrogate actively and purposefully those processes that limit their health and freedom" (Madison "Performance" 280).

Philip Taylor, author of *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, offers yet another important benefit to people whose stories are presented onstage. Applied theatre is a form of community-based theater that is created by – and, importantly, for – community members themselves. Working with professional artists, people from communities struggling with the aftermath of traumatic events (such as the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 or the mass murder-suicides at Jonestown) or ongoing social

problems (such as crime, domestic violence, suicide, unemployment, or drug abuse) participate in theater workshops and performance activities designed to “help communities determine some aspect of who they are and what they aspire to become” (Taylor xxvii).

Theater artists interact with community members, most of whom have little or no theater experience, in spaces outside of the mainstream theater house – for example, prisons, community centers, homeless shelters, schools, and industrial sites. Some collaborative theater of testimony projects fit Taylor’s description of applied theater; as noted below, he uses *The Laramie Project* as one example.

Drawing on the work of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, Taylor argues that applied theatre can be socially and personally transformative for participants because it allows people to “connect with and support one another” and provides opportunities “for groups to voice who they are and what they aspire to become.” Through applied theatre “storytellers . . . can step into the perspectives of others and gain entry points to different worldviews . . .” (xviii).

Taylor argues that theater can benefit communities in other ways, as well – helping to heal psychological wounds and giving voice to people who’ve been shut out or marginalized, for example. Taylor uses the example of Tectonic Theater Company’s *The Laramie Project* to illustrate his point:

What motivates hate? How can people commit such horrible crimes? How is it possible for the brutal beating of people like Matthew Shepard and others to occur? Applied theatre is but one forum where these issues can

be raised and considered. In [*The Laramie Project*], the playwright contemplates whether theatre can play a role in exploring what leads to hate such as those attacks fueled by homophobia. . . . The narratives exposed through [interviews with citizens of Laramie] were rendered into a dramatic text that was performed in a number of locations, including the city where the crime happened. When presented, it generates considerable conversation about the kind of world in which we live and want to create. Applied theatre provides a significant public service by enabling communities to talk freely about their own, and others', perceptions and values. (xxv – xxvi)

Karen Blansfield, author of “The Healing Power of Theatre,” observes that for the citizens of Laramie, engaging in dialogue through performance became the impetus for healing:

Through theatre, something nourishing can be born of tragedy, and through theatre, communities can rediscover a vital and ancient unity. Such a work as *The Laramie Project* offers at once a means of understanding one another, the opportunities for connections, and the hope of transforming grief and bewilderment into acceptance, endurance, and growth.

Leigh Fondakowski, head writer of *The Laramie Project*, was commissioned by David Dower, artistic director of San Francisco's Z Space Studio, to create and direct a play about The Peoples Temple and the Jonestown mass murder-suicides. The project

took four years to complete. Fondakowski and her collaborators (many of whom are Tectonic Theater Project members) interviewed dozens of former Peoples Temple members, survivors, and victims' family members; they also drew material from documents and letters in the massive archive of The Peoples Temple. The process was a truly collaborative one: Fondakowski and her team led work-in-progress readings with actors and former Peoples Temple members, continually collected new interview material to weave into the playscript, sought audience feedback, and reworked the script until its opening in 2005 (Levy and Miller). After viewing a production of *The People's Temple*, Tim Carter, a former member of the group whose story was portrayed on stage, offered his own testimony about the power of performance:

I found that watching the play and reconnecting with those I still consider “family” to be incredibly cathartic. I experienced joy, sorrow and to a certain extent, resolution. I left the theatre feeling that, after 27 years, the people of Jonestown finally have a voice. The fallacy of “mass suicide” is confronted head-on. Many stories are being heard for the first times. And the joy that existed in PT [The Peoples Temple], as well as the contradictions and the pain, is made tangible.

Carter's testimony is but one of many that speaks to the transformative potential of performance for the subjects of a theatrical work. He demonstrates that even after decades have elapsed, performance can enable subjects to both gain new insight into their pasts and move into their futures with a new and different perspective.

The Performance of Possibilities: Implications for Audience Members

I move now to a discussion of the implications a performance-based pedagogy holds for audience members. Madison and the other scholars whose work I present below believe that when audience members connect with subjects as presented in performance, they realized that “we are all part of a larger whole and are therefore radically responsible to each other for all of our individual selves” (*Critical Ethnography* 175). Thus, in performance, a focus on the subjectivity of subjects is joined with a focus on the *intersubjectivity* of audience members (italics in the original). Madison explains:

Because performance asks the audience to travel empathically to the world of the subjects and to feel and know some of what they feel and know, two life-worlds meet and the domain of outsider and insider are simultaneously demarcated and fused. I have an identity separate from the subject, and the performance clearly illuminates our differences. In the space of the performance, I am outsider; in the space of the world these positions are more likely switched: I am insider and the subject is the outsider. While I see that I am an outsider to the subject’s experience, the performance ironically pulls me inside. (176)

The potential of the audience member’s ironic state is immense – it sets up the possibility that the audience member will identify with the subject, enter the subject’s world, and be propelled into what Madison calls a “path for action.” As the audience member witnesses the incongruity between the subject’s world and her own – and the underlying systems that create such imbalance – she may experience a transformation of

sorts, a transformation that will propel her to question the underlying causes of the incongruity she sees.

Michael Bowman, author of “Toward a Curriculum in Performance Studies,” concurs with Madison that performance has the power to provoke. He insists that it is critically important for performance studies scholars and artists to participate in and facilitate performances because of “the quality of talk we can generate *in* and *through* our performances.” He adds, “Of course, such performances will never “prove” anything to our more empiricist colleagues. But most performances never try to prove anything, anyway. They only provoke things. Sometimes, they even provoke thought” (193).

Eventually, if the performance has been thought provoking enough, an audience member may be compelled to act – may, in Madison’s words, “become witness, interlocutor, subversor, and creator” (*Critical Ethnography* 177). For Madison and the other scholars discussed below, a performance of possibilities from the audience member’s perspective is one in which the audience member leaves the theater a changed person – one who may be “both disturbed and inspired” (176), one who continues to think about, and ultimately, pursue the potential for change that the performance aroused.

Admittedly, trying to explain how such a transformation occurs is an insurmountable task, but many have tried. J. L. Styan, author of “The Mystery of the Play Experience: Quince’s Questions,” examines the connection that exists between audience, actor, and the play. He contemplates the “mystery” of the play experience – trying to understand how audiences can be affected by and through performance – a phenomenon that exists in the connection between audience and actor experienced at the

moment of performance. He writes eloquently that whenever people experience intense reactions to a performance, these reactions share a common feature: “[t]hey arise from the strange urge on the part of the actor and the spectator during performance to share an experience, and it is this bond between stage and audience that supplies the key to our interpretation of the text at the moment when it is transcended by performance” (13).

Styan, a theater semiotician, admits that he cannot explain the mystery of the theatrical experience, but he is certain that for it to occur there must be a “real actor and a real audience” (15) engaged in a relationship that happens in performance and that cannot be explained, therefore, in formal or abstract critical approaches:

The object of criticism must be the total performance, visual and aural, manipulating human space and time If the uncomfortable and distracting word *mystery* seems to close out rational discussion and even inhibit the use of semiotics, it nevertheless points to the aesthetic element we should attend to and not ignore. (15)

What relevance do Styan’s words have in the context of a critical performance pedagogy as far as audiences are concerned? It is simply this: before an audience can experience a “performance of possibilities,” they must allow themselves – and the performance must entice them – to share the experience with the actors onstage. Too, Styan offers a compelling rationale for looking at case studies of performances (as opposed to playscripts in isolation) as a means of understanding how collaborative theater of testimony operates as a way of knowing – it is not enough to study the scripts, although one might certainly begin there. But it is in the various acts of performance from

initial interviews to closing night – the exchanges among interviewers and collaborators, collaborators and actors, actors and audience – that the potential for the acquisition of new knowledge occurs.

Performance studies scholar Catherine Robertson concurs that it is in the act of performance that transformation can occur; but, she reminds us that a compelling text is a critical component of the performance. In “Performativity vs. Textuality: Some Second Thoughts,” she argues that the text is the starting point for performances that possess “transformative, critical powers”:

All the things we say about performance and its transformative, critical powers have to do with this dialectical relationship it engages with something else [its subject] – something outside itself. Without that tension, performance becomes mere spectacle or entertainment.

Performance is critical only as long as it is a tool for opening up a text or a discourse or a tradition. In this position, in the position of the verb, performance generates meaning. (89)

Scholars point to yet another way that performance can serve a critical end: when the performance text is based on the personal narratives of subjects who are silenced or marginalized by society, as is often the case in theater of testimony playscripts, the performance can serve to disrupt the conventional master narratives of the larger society. Foucault observes that members of a society’s dominant group reflexively incorporate into their speech what they know to be appropriate discourse from their society’s “stock of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann 41); the internal rules they follow in conversation

display a society's "major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualized texts to be spoken in well-defined circumstances; things said once, and conserved because people suspect some hidden secret or wealth lies buried within" (Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" 152). When the non-conventional narratives of subjects who are not in the dominant group are expressed in performance, the opportunity to question the dominant master narratives arises.

Frederick Corey, in "The Personal: Against the Master Narrative," argues that "the personal narrative is one way of disturbing the master narrative, and through the performative dimensions of the personal narrative, the individual is able to disrupt – and, dare I say *rewrite* – the master narrative" (250). Corey's work with personal narrative was essential in his coming to understand his own sexuality as a gay man, at the present time when heterosexuality is furthered by the existing master narratives. As he states, "the heteronormative narrative is public, historical, documented, and hegemonic" (250).

Corey explains that when individual voices are presented [onstage] that disrupt the master narratives, these voices operate, following Foucault in "The Subject and Power," as a form of "reverse discourse." The performance can generate new meaning and insight for audience members, challenging their existing attitudes and beliefs. Corey notes Stern and Henderson's assertion in *Performance: Texts and Contexts*:

[Through performance, people share] personal, lived experience in a way that assists in the construction of identity, reinforces or challenges private and public belief systems and values, and either resists or reinforces the

dominant cultural practices of the community in which the narrative event occurs. (Stern and Henderson 35).

Eric Rosen, co-founder of About Face Theatre in Chicago, a theater “dedicated to the artistic, intellectual, and political exploration of queer lives, experiences, and histories,” offers yet another example of how performance can affect audiences (84). He describes the work of the Chicago-based theater as an example of a theater that seeks to pull together three “disparate elements: professional theatre, the intellectual and artistic roots of a performance studies education, and the emergent field of Queer Studies” (84). While the members of the theater are interested in queer issues and the empowerment of the queer community, Rosen explains that their goal is to be the *artists* of the community rather than social workers, acknowledging “. . . that our goals are to develop art, and that the development of art will in turn have an impact on culture” (84).

By way of example, Rosen cites the response he received from an audience member who had attended the company’s production of *Dream Boy*, a play based on Jim Grimsley’s novel that addressed “issues of sexual awakening, rape, incest, and violence against gay men” (84). The audience member commented that the performance “helped me to get in touch with the hole that was left in me from my own childhood. . . .” (84). Rosen’s response illuminates theater’s powerful potential:

I found this response to be both unsettling and immensely gratifying, attesting to the power of the theatre to reflect the real world in ways that cause individual audience members to see themselves and the particularities of their lived experience. Here is a single moment where

artistic performance responds to, shapes, and re-makes culture, at least for one spectator. This response is complex and difficult, evidencing the power of live performance to exceed in impact the intentions of its creators. (84)

The Performance of Possibilities: Implications for Performers

We now move to a discussion of critical performance pedagogy in its most common manifestation in the scholarly literature – that is, as it relates to performers’ embodiment of subjects in the theatrical production. Anna Deavere Smith, the playwright/actor whose theater of testimony works I discussed in Chapter One, portrays dozens of diverse characters based on her interviews with people across the United States, playing across race, sex, socioeconomic status, and age, embodying their physical movements and vocal patterns. In the preface to *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith suggests that such embodiment can lead to a clearer understanding of people different than oneself. Smith describes the impetus of her artistic approach:

To me, the search for character is constantly changing. It is a quest that moves back and forth between the self and other. [I developed this approach because] I needed evidence that you could find a character’s psychological reality by “inhabiting” that character’s words. . . . I needed very graphic evidence that the manner of speech could be a mark of individuality. If we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally. . . . Learning about the other by

being the other requires the use of all aspects of memory, the memory of the body, mind, and heart, as well as the words. (xxvii)

In “being the other,” the performer is, in Madison’s words, “*taking it all in*, internalizing and receiving partial maps of meaning that reflect the subject’s consciousness and context” a task that is weighted with the responsibility of representing the subject fairly in performance (italics in the original) (*Critical Ethnography* 177). As Smith implies above, Madison, too, urges the actor to immerse herself into the subject’s world during the rehearsal process, “doing what must be done or going where one must go – to experience the felt-sensing dynamic of that world: its tone color – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, rhythms – the visceral ethos of that world” (*Critical Ethnography* 177). In so doing, the performer prepares for the difficult task of representing the other, the key to opening up a performance of possibilities for subjects, audience members, and performers alike. For the performer, Madison insists that

[i]n the performance of possibilities, we understand representation as first and foremost a responsibility. [Performers] are responsible for the creation of what and who is being represented. . . . The body politic responds to individuals and communities by the way they understand them, which is itself based upon a complex configuration of discourses and experiences, none of which is more profound than how these lives enter their consciousness through representations in cultural performances. (178)

Madison cautions that actors should not presume to view their performances as providing the sole voice of subjects, for she asserts that marginalized people have long

been speaking and will continue to speak in ways and in places unknown to members of dominant groups. Similarly, performers should not assume that they alone have the knowledge and skill to motivate people to “intervene in injustice,” for people have long been intervening and will continue to do so through various forms. Like Conquergood, Madison views performing the “contested identities” of others as an moral act, one that necessitates caution and an awareness of the political – and material – consequences of performing. Following Conquergood’s view of performance as kinesis, a force that has the power of “breaking and remaking” social structures (Conquergood, “Beyond the Text” 32), she stresses that actors in the performance of possibilities “are involved with the ‘opening the self’ work of breaking, with the grandest dialogic possibility of remaking” (178).

The commitment required when a performer opens herself to the act of embodiment has transformative potential, as the scholars discussed below attest. Contemporary scholars’ work related to embodiment in performance is indebted to the work of communication studies scholar Wallace Bacon, whose 1972 text, *The Art of Interpretation*, introduced the idea that engaging in performance can lead to new knowledge. In defining the art of oral interpretation, Bacon states, “It is our point of view that interpretation may best be defined as the study of literature *through the medium of oral performance*” (italics in the original) (6).

Bacon’s premise is that literature is best studied through performance, an active process that requires that the actor’s senses are engaged. As he notes, “Interpretation is an excellent way of studying literature because it demands that the student perceive.

Passivity is a completely impossible state for the oral reader.” It is this active participation and sensory involvement that leads to understanding. Bacon attests, previewing what performance studies scholars will later call “embodiment,” that “[i]n the process of becoming, the whole reader becomes, just as the whole poem becomes. It is in full communion between reader, poem, and audience toward which interpretation as an art and as an act moves. In the act of communion, communication occurs (6-7).”

Bacon offers the performer numerous strategies for becoming the characters in the literature, including striving to embody the “tensive qualities written into the language” (94). By “tensive,” he refers to the qualities in literature that add to its elasticity or tautness – those images, figures of speech, word choices, rhythms, etc. that create the “ebb and flow” of literary works and allow the performer to participate “in the cycle of tension and release, which is the life of texts” (498). The interpreter works to find such tensiveness in her body so that she can bring the reading to life – in effect, to embody it in performance.

Put another way, Bacon asserts that becoming the character requires the interpreter to engage cognitively, viscerally and emotionally – what he calls “*felt sensing*” (a term that Madison borrows, above). Bacon also suggests visualization techniques to help the actor experience the feelings of the characters so as to perform the role most effectively (94-95). Both techniques are integrated into what we now view as performance-based pedagogy; the value of such work for actors remains the same as when Bacon introduced the idea:

The essential educational value of interpretation as a separate and distinct aspect of speech and of literary study lies in its emphasis on the bringing together into an organic relationship of student and poem [or playscript] It is in the process of matching – of bringing his own life form for the moment into congruence with the life form of the poem [playscript] – that the interpreter first and foremost devotes his attention. (450-451)

In hindsight, we see that Bacon foreshadowed the work of performance scholars to come when he concluded, “The total process of enactment is highly complex, as are all life acts; we have only begun, doubtless, to touch on many of the matters involved in it” (451). An understatement, indeed! For the actors in theater of testimony performance, this complex process of enactment begins when the actor searches for connections with her own life and the lives of subjects she embodies in performance - through *felt sensing*, she soon comes to *know*.

A contemporary technique developed by Nathan Stucky, Everyday Life Performance, or ELP, focuses on the act of embodying a subject such that the performer replicates the “intricate detail, the paralinguistic and interpersonal complexity, of the original” subject (132). Used originally by communication scholars as a method of conversational analysis, ELP has relevance for performers in the theater, as well. Performers work to portray, in exacting detail, a real person engaged in conversation, striving to embody the person’s breathing patterns, speech patterns, and movements. Stucky writes that “[c]onversational performance writes the experience of one body on another like a palimpsest of embodiment” (131).

Stucky likens this work to the work of Anna Deavere Smith, who evokes, through careful attention to the language and movement of the people she presents, various real-life “characters” in her performances. Stucky notes that Smith listens over and over again to the tape recorded voices of her interviewees, repeating the words until they become a part of her. Thus, as Stucky explains, performance is used as an “investigatory tool” (136): or, put another way, performance operates as “a way of knowing,” a term he borrows from his colleague Ronald Pelias, who attributes his use of the phrase to his graduate teachers, Leland H. Roloff and Joanna H. Maclay (143):

Acts of conversational performance (especially ELP) open the way to profound knowing. Careful phenomenological description can (arguably, at least) point toward this knowing. However, in the most profound sense, your body really has to be there to know. The knowledge gained from deep embodiment is ineffable; it uncovers nuances we cannot fully express, evokes things unique, personal, and intimate. . . . The process of embodying an other, a text, a persona, or a character makes possible radical understanding. The phrase “performance as a way of knowing” points toward this process by implicating the body as a site of knowledge. Performance as a way of knowing means developing “felt knowledge,” a kind of insight unique to the performer. (137-138)

One of the many insights performers experience is an increased “awareness of others’ ideological and social subjectivities. . . .” (Stucky and Wimmer 4). Mercilee Jenkins, author of “Personal Narratives Changed My Life: Can They Foretell the

Future?” argues that “in the moment of performance, we sometimes connect with the emotions of the performed other in a way I have not seen accomplished by any conventional acting techniques” (271). Consider, for example, Galen Koch, a young woman who portrayed a sea urchin diver and a ferryboat captain in *Women and the Sea*, a production created from the testimonies of women fishing-industry workers in Maine. Although not from a fishing family herself, Koch connected with women who were: “At every rehearsal, certain parts make me tear up. It’s really powerful and very important. I relate to the anguish and the problems brought up in the play. . . [the play] gives good positive and negative views of life in a fishing community and I love that whole heritage” (Anstead C3).

Similarly, Michelle Kisliuk, an ethnographer who works with the BaAka people in Centrafrique, attests to the role that embodiment plays in facilitating new awareness among her college students in Virginia – an awareness of “both macro and micro politics of ‘here’ and ‘there’ that resonates both politically and aesthetically” (103). She acknowledges the importance of context as she teaches the BaAka dances to students in Charlottesville, Virginia, a stronghold in the Confederacy:

The festering wound of the racist history of the United States is present here, and this performance community – with bodies that are dancing and singing and embodying issues of self and other – brings to the surface immediate questions that might otherwise stay in the theoretical realm. (105)

Kisliuk asserts that embodiment challenges dualistic thinking (mind/body, art/scholarship, self/other, for example) and disrupts the centrisms that such dualisms underpin. She states that instead, when “dualistic thinking shifts to multiplex thinking, there is no longer one center but many, ever shifting centers” (107). As I will discuss in a subsequent chapter, the work I facilitated with students at Hampden-Sydney College and inmates at Piedmont Regional Jail similarly disrupts the us/them, student/inmate dualism, making, one hopes, a space for the acknowledgement of the conditions that construct such centric thinking in the first place. For example, classcentrism suggests to our college students that any hard working person can and should go to college, regardless of his or her educational background or life chances.

In a related example of the potential of performance to transform actors, Joni Jones, author of “Teaching in the Borderlands,” discusses her pedagogical approach in her course entitled “Performance of Dramatic Literature.” Through a series of performance exercises, many preceded by writing assignments and other forms of analysis, Jones’ classroom becomes a “space of resistance” (175) where students are asked to confront their stereotypes about race and ethnicity. Through performance, issues of race and ethnicity become “more than intellectual challenges, because the students must literally put the issues inside of themselves as they embody the characters [from various literary sources].” In other words, as David Worley, author of “Is Critical Performative Pedagogy Practical?” states, “[U]nderstanding comes via the movement of the body and the engagement of the soul (137). In performance, actors gain insight into their own attitudes toward otherness when they explore the characters they perform.

Jones attests that “students interrogate the construction of their self-identities as a necessary component of exploring the characters of others. Performance shifts one’s molecules and makes one new.” (176)

Acknowledging Bacon’s work in *The Art of Interpretation*, Jones explains that the embodied performance allows performers to find the common ground between themselves and others: “. . . performance is sense making in which the self must relinquish center stage in order to fully respond to and embody an other” (177). Following Grossberg, Jones suggests that in the performance classroom she and students create a space where “radical contextualism” can occur; in its “political practice,” Grossberg writes, cultural studies is “the practice of making contexts” (qtd. in Jones 177). Through performance, students experience the lives of others in their particular cultural context more fully than they would by conventional means.

In sum, experiencing the lives of others through performance – as actor, audience member, or subject – stimulates the acquisition of knowledge. Critical performance pedagogy makes a *performance of possibilities* attainable; through performance, as the scholars above illustrate, subjects are acknowledged and empowered; communities are healed, enlightened, provoked, and, sometimes, motivated to act; and performers are enriched and challenged to rethink their own attitudes and beliefs. A note of caution, however: inherent in this transformative potential for good also lies the sometimes overlooked potential for harm. Thus, I conclude this chapter with a consideration of the ethical issues associated with embodied performance, considerations particularly salient for theater of testimony playwrights, directors, and actors.

Ethical Considerations in Theater of Testimony Performance

Scripting and then performing the personal narratives and testimonies of subjects, particularly of subjects whose voices have been silenced, presents particular moral considerations for playwrights, actors, and directors. Noted performance studies scholar, Dwight Conquergood, in his seminal essay “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” presents several challenges confronting theater practitioners who present the testimonies of others. He argues that to perform is to engage in a moral act and that performers (and, I would add, directors and playwrights) must be aware of their own motivations to engage in performance. Conquergood notes that a reflexive stance is especially relevant when performers “attempt to engage ethnic and intercultural texts, particularly those texts outside the canon and derived from fieldwork research” (2). Conquergood’s oft-quoted “four ethical pitfalls” or “performance stances” grew out of his own work as a performer, as he explains below:

. . . I began doing this kind of work [performing others’ testimonies] focused on performance as a way of knowing and deeply sensing the other. Hostile audiences [who accused him of promoting non-Christian beliefs, non-scientific explanations of phenomena, using nonstandard grammar, etc.] have helped me see performance as the enactment of a moral stance. Now I have become deeply interested in the ethical dimensions of performing the expressive art that springs from other lives, other sensibilities, other cultures. (4)

Conquergood outlines four moral stances that theater practitioners face when presenting subjects' personal narratives and testimonies. Note that while I am using the term "performer" in keeping with Conquergood's terminology, these stances apply to playwrights and directors, as well.

The first stance, "The Custodian's Rip-Off" is perhaps the most heinous, for the problem with this stance is one of selfishness. The performer takes possession of some bit of the subject's culture and performs it for his own benefit. Often the actor is just looking for good material to perform, without consideration of how taking something sacred or private might exploit the subject.

A second stance, "The Enthusiast's Infatuation," oftentimes befalls the most well-meaning of performers. This actor explores the similarities between the subject and herself and presents the material with an eagerness that communicates to the audience the "sameness" of the subject, or, in Conquergood's words, "the other," to her own. To do so means that the "distinctiveness of the other is glossed over by a glaze of generalities." Conquergood references Todorov who cautions that when we project our own identity on the other it is as if we are trying to transform that other, an act that may lead to subjugation of the other. We miss truly learning about the other – and therefore learning about ourselves – when we trivialize the difference of the other from ourselves.

"The Curator's Exhibitionism," stance three, is what Conquergood characterizes as the "Wild Kingdom" approach: the performer "wants to astonish rather than understand." Such an approach leads to sensationalism, a kind of performance that presents "curio postcards" that ultimately dehumanize and exoticize the other.

Finally, the fourth stance, “The Skeptic’s Cop-Out,” is one that is particularly distasteful to Conquergood, a stance he characterizes as “the refuge of cowards and cynics.” In this stance, the performer simply refuses to perform the other, being skeptical that anyone other than a person from the subject’s own culture should represent the subject. Conquergood finds this stance reprehensible because it means that conversation is cut off before it has a chance to begin, as Conquergood explains: “The skeptic . . . shuts down the very idea of entering into conversation with the other before the attempt, however problematic, begins” (8).

Conquergood suggests another perspective that would empower the subjects of the performance while it opens the door for critical engagement between performers and audience members. “Dialogical performance” is a stance that

struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogic performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another” (9).

Conquergood explains that the end result of such performance is not simply empathy – it goes further, presenting differences in such a way that the performer and the other are brought together while at the same time being held apart. As he explains, “[The dialogical stance] is more like a hyphen than a period.” Further, Conquergood notes that “[w]hen we have true respect for the Difference of other cultures, then we grant them the potential for challenging our own culture. Genuine dialogical engagement is at least a two-way

thoroughfare” (9). In a sense, this performance stance allows conversations between cultures – a talking “with,” not a talking “about,” the other.

What better way to ensure that the subjects’ voices are heard and subsequently represented fairly in their social and political contexts, than to create the performance in collaboration with the subjects themselves? In so doing, theater practitioners – interviewers, ethnographers, playwrights, directors, actors, designers, and technicians – are most likely to avoid the four ethical pitfalls that may befall theater of testimony performance and other forms of performance ethnography. In a true collaborative process, as scholars from numerous disciplines attest, participants in the performance experience – audience members, performers, and subjects – are invested in a performance of possibilities that “functions as a politically engaged pedagogy” (Madison, “Performance” 277) with transformative potential at both the individual and collective level.

Having provided an overview of both theater of testimony performance and critical performance pedagogy, it is now time to merge theory and practice. In the next two chapters I examine the potential of critical performance pedagogy in two case studies. In Chapter Three, I present excerpts from interviews that I conducted with Kelli Simpkins, a professional actor who participated in the original creation and production of two important collaborative theater of testimony productions, *The Laramie Project* and *The People’s Temple*. Simpkins articulates, with eloquence and passion, the potential of theater of testimony to powerfully affect the lives of community members, actors, and audience members. In Chapter Four, I explore my own directorial work in an original

collaborative theater of testimony piece, *Committed*, a play created by students at Hampden-Sydney College and inmates at Piedmont Regional Jail. Juxtaposing the perspective of a seasoned professional with the perspectives of first-time actors, several of whom have never attended a play, allows for an interesting comparative study of theater of testimony's transformative potential.

CHAPTER 3: AN INTERVIEW WITH KELLI SIMPKINS, PROFESSIONAL ACTOR

“What most influences my decisions about what to include [in a playscript] is how an interview text works as a *physical, audible, performable* vehicle. Words are not an end in themselves. They are a means to evoking the character of the person who spoke them.”
(Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* xxiii-xxiv)

In this chapter I present excerpts of interviews I conducted with Kelli Simpkins⁶, a professional actor whose work over the past decade has included numerous theater of testimony productions. What follows is a case study of one actor’s experience; the evidence comes from the actor herself, as shared with me in interviews and through email correspondence.

As I noted in the Introduction, a researcher cannot generalize from a single case study to every other case. That said, this particular case study is notable and valuable because Simpkins is one of only a handful of professional actors who have participated in the creation and production of two important and ground-breaking theater of testimony works, *The Laramie Project* and *The People’s Temple*. Her statements serve as a remarkable testament to theater of testimony’s potential to affect the lives of actors, audiences, and community members whose stories are told in performance, as experienced firsthand by a professional actor. It is through the voice of an experienced performer that we may “put to the test” performance theorists’ claim that performance functions as a unique way of knowing.

Simpkins, as she explains below, collaborated with Moisés Kaufman and members of Tectonic Theater Project in the original production of *The Laramie Project*, interviewing citizens of Laramie, participating in script development and workshops, and performing in productions. Too, she collaborated with Leigh Fondakowski on two important theater of testimony productions, *I Think I Like Girls* and *The People's Temple*. The excerpts below are compiled from two separate interviews, the first in Chicago, in February, 2007, following the About Face Theatre Company's production of Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice*. Simpkins acted in the performance and, to my delight, generously agreed to meet with me between a matinee and an evening production during what was, obviously, a hectic time for her. The second interview, conducted in April, 2007, was a phone interview; Simpkins was at her home in Chicago and I was at mine in Virginia. We have also corresponded frequently over the past two years, using electronic mail, and have shared in the editing of the final version of this interview.

I edited the interviews for clarity, removing our occasional verbal fillers as well as passages unrelated to the topic at hand. Rather than presenting the interviews separately, I wove them together, rearranging the order in some cases to allow for a somewhat thematic presentation of Simpkins' discussion about her work with theater of testimony performance. Too, in keeping with the principles of collaborative ethnography, I asked Simpkins to review the interview transcriptions and the following compilation of our discussions, a request she graciously honored. In some instances, Simpkins clarified, edited, and/or elaborated upon her earlier responses.

In the interview below, Simpkins first discusses how she became involved in theater of testimony production work, why she is drawn to the form, and the collaborative methods she finds most productive as an actor. Of particular interest to theater practitioners is her explanation of “moment work,” a technique pioneered by Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project. Simpkins also discusses some of the challenges in creating the performance script, including the difficult balance of honoring subjects’ voices while maintaining the dramatic structure and artistic integrity necessitated by the theater of testimony form. Simpkins’ thoughts about the efficacy of performance for communities, actors, and audience members are particularly relevant to the scholarly discussions of critical performance pedagogy that I presented in Chapter Two. Simpkins’ passionate discussion about theater’s transformative potential both validates performance theorists’ claims and challenges theater practitioners to contribute to the national dialogue by bearing witness to the epic events of our own time.

Simpkins first worked in theater of testimony as an actor in Leigh Fondakowski’s production of I Think I Like Girls. Later, she joined the ensemble of Tectonic Theater Company’s production of The Laramie Project. Simpkins’ enthusiasm for the theater of testimony form began during that first collaboration. The experience “radically transformed [her] idea of what theater can do and what theater is, and what the impact of that kind of theater can have for an audience and for the person performing it,” as Simpkins suggests in the conversation that follows:

CD: I wanted to ask you first of all about your work with *The Laramie Project*, specifically how you got started in it – the nuts and bolts of going to Laramie, recording people, coming back, and workshopping the script. How did all that happen?

KS: I got involved because of Leigh Fondakowski, a big verbatim text/documentary director; she and I started working together when she cast me in a show called *I Think I Like Girls*. Moisés Kaufman, the director of *The Laramie Project*, came to see that show in New York. Leigh spent a couple of years traveling across the country interviewing people. It was originally going to be a show about lesbians and their mothers, but it ended up being a vastly rich show about a multitude of things. I love it so much, and maybe it's because there are so many things that just resonate with me as a lesbian, but I think it's just a beautiful, brilliant, tapestry of women, telling a story that isn't often heard.

It was the first time I think that I had played a real person. The woman I played, who has since transitioned and is now a man, was transgendered and was institutionalized for four years for Gender Identity Disorder. Her name was Daphne Scholinski; it is now Dylan Scholinski. It just changed my life working on that play. Honestly, I fell in love with this person. She – he, now – is a brilliant artist. Participating in the production just radically transformed my idea of what theater can do and what theater is, and what the impact of that kind of theater can have for an audience and for the person performing it.

I mean it's so interesting, all of these questions and what you are doing because it not only, I think, profoundly changed my attitude about theater and who I am as a performer, but really changed my life as a human being.

Much of the transformative potential of this type of theater for Simpkins, as an actor, stems in part from the script development techniques that both Kaufman and Fondakowski use in their work. Moisés Kaufman, director of The Laramie Project, pioneered the technique known as "moment work," a collaborative and actor-centered technique that Simpkins finds particularly empowering:

KS: Moisés basically works with a technique that he calls moment work, and it is, in the large sense of the word, a really *empowering* way for an actor to work. Essentially, it is a technique to write performance for the stage, utilizing the elements of the stage, one moment or theatrical beat at a time. [A moment] can be as *simple* as walking on stage, opening an umbrella and closing an umbrella...or as *complex* as piecing together an entire section with text and elements, in a theatrically compelling way.

And some of what prompted this technique was an opposition to the traditional method of playmaking: the idea of a writer going into a room alone, writing a play, and then the actors' jobs being simply to make that play believable, which is a very limited creative role for the artists. So Moisés began to depart from this way of making work by starting with the elements of the stage

(light, sound, architecture, character, costume, gesture, movement, etc.) rather than text. In essence, he wanted a way of going *against* “text as tyrant” and the commonly accepted idea of the theater as a means to explore naturalism and realism. His question is: What can we as theatre artists do that film and television *can't*? We can't make new theater using old forms. So how do we make new work and find new forms? These questions are what led to moment work. We start with the tools of the stage, the elements, and in this way we find new forms and make highly theatrical work by focusing on what the strengths of the theater actually are.

It always starts with [the actor saying] “I begin” and then when the moment is done, it's “I end.” The moment is between “I begin” and “I end.” So it's just such an empowering way for an actor to be a part of the creative process and the collaboration. You're like a director, a designer – you bring in lights, sound, costumes. It's the way we wrote *I Think I Like Girls* and the way we wrote *The Laramie Project*.

CD: So as an actor, when you are engaged in moment work, you are focusing on expressing a particular moment?

KS: Yes, it's all what's interesting to the actor. As *The Laramie Project* progressed, the moment work became much more specific and directed toward what was needed for the play. Moisés would say, “Bring in death penalty moments,” and

that could be anything. It really opened your imagination to what a script can contain and what you can do as an ensemble. It doesn't have to be realistic.

Part of the way we have created a lot of this work is that something happens that just creates a lighting bolt in either Moises' mind or in the mind of an ensemble member, and you go, "Oh my God, I'm going to get in there. Can I do another? Can I do something else with this?" And they are like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, get up and do something!" Or something will happen and you go, "Oh, this will be great," and Moisés will just say, "Show me – show me what you mean. Instead of talking about it, show me."

CD: How did you become involved in *The Laramie Project*?

KS: Tectonic Theater Project had done a few workshops – or one workshop, I think – of *The Laramie Project* before I became involved with it. Moisés had seen *I Think I Like Girls* and, luckily for me, a woman he was working with on *The Laramie Project* wasn't really working out, so he asked me to come along and we went to Sundance Theater Lab, so that's how I became involved in that project. I mostly sat in on subsequent interviews with people I would be playing and got to ask questions and get a sense of who they were. But the bulk of the interviews were conducted by Moisés, Leigh, Greg and Steve⁷.

In traveling to Laramie, the actor/interviewers knew that they were entering a community still reeling from the effects of Shepard's murder. Immersing themselves in such a community brought with it several challenges, particularly for the gay and lesbian actors in the company.

CD: What was that like as lesbian going to a place where a gay person had been murdered, not knowing who you're going to interview and what their take is going to be?

KS: The company had made one or two trips before I went [to Laramie]. Had I been on the original trip I think it would have been a much different situation. In the beginning, I think that the gay members of the company, and I [as well], felt that there was a lot of intense unease, not knowing what was going to happen [or] what people's response was going to be and what it was going to be like [for gay and lesbian members of the company].

[We found that] there was a little ripple effect over the community – it was like if you were in good with one person in the community, they would say, “You should talk to these people. I am going to give them a phone call and let them know.” Certainly it is not the place you would walk into a bar with your girlfriend and hold hands or make out on the street or do anything like you could do in New York or a big urban area. I think after Matthew's death there were the people

in the community who became much more militantly homophobic and others who became much more open.

There were people in the gay community there who were closeted who became really kind of *righteous* about their sexuality and started getting together, having pot lucks and meeting other people in the community, and really being as out as they could be. That differs from person to person that we met there. Some went back into the closet.

As Simpkins suggests, the trust that developed between interviewers and community members contributed to the willingness of community members to share their testimonies. As relationships strengthened among the actors and the interviewees, the company faced new challenges – wanting to both honor subjects’ stories and create a performance piece that met the needs of the playscript and the theater of testimony form:

CD: In terms of going to Laramie, working on the show, workshopping it, and then mounting the production, did you ever have any kind of ethical dilemma about what you were doing? I mean, as one of the interviewees says in *The Laramie Project*, “I will trust you people that if you write a play of this, that you (pause) say it right, say it correct. I think you have a responsibility to do that You need to do your best to say it correct” (66). Did you ever wonder if you were saying it right? Or, alternately, did you feel confident that you were?

KS: I think for the most part we were. Father Roger Schmitt, who is the one that says that in the play, is such a lovely man. He is the Catholic priest who *radically* – I don’t know if radical is the right word – but had a radical shift in [perspective]. He started holding different LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] forums in his church. He really didn’t care what the hierarchy in the Catholic Church said; he was like, “We need to be a part of this community. We need to show up as religious leaders and spiritual participants in what’s going on here.”

[There were people that I met [who] had a much more profound experience [than] even what Father Roger said. As you said, I wondered if we were getting it right.

I think the difficulty in this kind of work for me, and for a lot of people in that ensemble, is that it becomes a *theatrical event* at some level. I mean, it doesn’t become fiction because *it’s not fiction*, but it almost has a fictional aspect to it in ways. If I remember correctly, some of the reviews said that the ensemble members were too close to that community to be harsh enough – they were too close to the people that they interviewed to actually take that town to task.

So, I think there was that fear that we weren’t getting it right; it’s an emotionally difficult thing to become so close, in many ways, to a community and the people in it and to also exercise the proper amount of distance to be objective. I worried about Matthew’s family and what they were going through, which none of us could begin to imagine, and what potential impact our being there had on them at such a devastating time.

And I also worried that we did not put enough of the two accused and their people in the play. We later ended up adding a scene in a bar with Shannon and Jen, two of Aaron McKinney's friends. When you are portraying people, especially people who are living and are going to come and see the show – and a lot of them came to Denver where we opened, and New York, and then to Laramie where we did the show there for a week for most of that town – I think there certainly is a huge risk and responsibility.

On some level, as an actor, as a performer, or even as part of the collaborating ensemble, you have to kind of let that go to try to tell the accurate story of what that town really was like after Matthew's murder happened.

Although Simpkins and her fellow company members struggled with how to balance human relationships with the requirements of the script, in the end, the company's efforts were successful. Simpkins acknowledges that theater of testimony performance possesses the potential to heal a hurting community and help its members move forward:

KS: I think more than the performance, many of them had said this to us, that the reason that [our theater company coming to their town and creating a play] worked in a lot of ways was that there was such an onslaught of the media that happened right after Matthew's murder. The media were there for the five second plug; they were there for a tagline. They were extremely judgmental and critical

of this “hillbilly, flannel backs, kind of horseback riding, wouldn’t know a . . .”

There was all this criticism of them as a community.

[The media’s presence, unlike our presence] wasn’t about intimates sitting down. It wasn’t about getting to know them. It wasn’t really about any kind of questions and answers. It was like a sound bite, and you know for the LGBT people, especially the students who were at the University, it was a wickedly scary time for them, really a traumatic time for them. So I think what changed that community, and what changed, I think, our theater company, was that we went in there without any preconceived notions of whether a play was going to truly happen out of it.

We really sat down with people in the community – some people had up to five or six interviews – and talked about things. I think after so many trips we really learned to kind of let them talk and if there was a pause not to fill it – to really let their experience come through. I think that was what was so [transformative] for that community: [they found] a group of people coming in shortly after the media had left, really willing to listen and participate in a conversation about big issues.

The surviving members of the Peoples Temple community also struggled, as did the people of Laramie, with the onslaught of media attention after great tragedy – the deaths of over nine hundred Temple members in Jonestown, Guyana. Although she initially joined the company of The People’s Temple as an actor, Simpkins later had the

opportunity to work as a dramaturg on the piece. She was also involved in numerous script development workshops and she participated in preview performances of the script for various audiences:

KS: I came in initially as a performer [in *The People's Temple*]. [Leigh Fondakowski] was commissioned [to create and direct] *The People's Temple* – it was going to be the 25th anniversary of the mass murder-suicides in Jonestown. I remember hearing about it.

She and Greg Pierotti, a writer for *The Laramie Project* primarily did the majority of the interviews, initially. She got together a group of people out in Berkeley and the Bay Area in Oakland and San Francisco to do an initial reading of it. I wasn't involved in that – it was probably four, four and a half years ago that I was asked to come into a workshop in New York and just did every subsequent workshop, and then we started doing performances a few years ago.

CD: So you took it to New York to put the finishing touches on it?

KS: No, this was actually quite a ways [and several workshops prior to going] to Berkeley for the opening. We went to Berkeley in March of 2005, which was the first time we had done a full set of performances. As is typical with *The Laramie Project* and everything else we've done, the process is to do some interviews, come back and have people read through the text, and then slowly start to piece a

script together. Then, we do a workshop involving moment work and do kind of a performance for an invited audience at the end of that – whether that’s showing moments or whether that’s just sitting at music stands reading scripts.

So we did quite a few of those and have continued. After it [opened in] Berkeley we went to Alaska and did a few weeks there, and then we went to Minneapolis to do an eight-week run at the Guthrie. [We are still] evolving the script, changing it and really trying to hone it and put finishing touches on it.

Leigh is currently in Chicago in rehearsals for the first *People’s Temple* production since The Guthrie. Unfortunately, I was unable to do it; she has a wonderful Chicago cast and it starts a run here in September.

CD: One of the reviews I read about an early production was about the absence of Jim Jones as a central figure in the script. The reviewer, a former member of the Peoples Temple, felt that if Jim Jones had figured into it more it would have helped to reveal why everyone followed him – in part, because Jones was so charismatic: I wonder what you think about that? My research shows that it was Leigh’s intent to focus on other parts of the Peoples Temple and not to make him central.

KS: We’ve had so many conversations about that issue – like how do you make a play about this event, or leading up to this event, and kind of after this event without having Jim Jones be a central figure? And I think for Leigh it’s been a really huge

question. I think Jones has been in more and then taken out and then put more back in. I think we have a pretty decent amount of material on him as the script stands right now. But I think her conflict with Jones was that what really motivated this story for her were the *people*, why they joined, who they were. You know I [hardly knew] anything about this story when I first came on, except that it was about “crazy people in the jungle.”

I traveled to Chicago in September, 2008 to see the new production of The People’s Temple. As Simpkins noted, there was a significant amount of material about Jones in the script – his charismatic personality was a prominent part of the story. For Simpkins, doing research about the community and then working intimately on the development of the script increased her understanding of the community as a whole, its members, and its goals:

KS: I learned that seventy five percent of the people who died were African American, what kind of background they came from, what was going on politically and socially. I also discovered that people were attracted to the Peoples Temple, both as a social and political cause, and some sought rehabilitation from drugs and alcohol addiction. Jones brought in so many different types of people. I think Leigh really wanted to focus on what their journey was, individually and collectively, and what drew them there. The question comes up: “Why were they were drawn to this man?” You obviously

have to read the script or possibly see the production to understand all the different ramifications of why they stayed. Leigh really thought that there had been so much media attention already given to him as this charismatic “cult leader” that she really wanted to focus on the people who were in the Temple – those who really made the Temple run and why they stayed there.

CD: You know I couldn’t help thinking about that this week [April 2007, at the time of this interview] with all the media attention focused on the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech. Most of the coverage here in Virginia is centered on the shooter instead of the people whose lives were lost and the people affected by that loss. Why are we focusing on him?

KS: Yes, exactly. I think part of why some of the Peoples Temple interviewees were so fearful was because they had been burned so badly by the media. It’s similar anytime you do work like this – we found that similarity with *Laramie*. The media had been just taking the sound bite, and called the Temple members any number of different names, and really weren’t there to participate in any kind of healing. They weren’t there to really listen to a community struggle with something.

So I think it’s always easier to focus on one person and one thing and make that the ultimate story. It’s more difficult to really navigate the hearts and minds of people who were part of a huge following like the Peoples Temple. I

completely understand [their skepticism] that our interviewing was an honest pursuit. The media focused on Jones. Even the people who have been interviewed, who've tried to honestly sit down and impart what they went through and what their experience was, have just been background voice to the "crazy cult leader."

As was the case with The Laramie Project, Simpkins found that building trust among the interviewees was critically important both in generating material for the script and in honoring the stories of the survivors and the victims' relatives:

CD: I imagine that it took a lot of trust-building on your part for former Temple members to be willing to talk about their experiences.

KS: Yes. Leigh and Greg, who did the majority of the interviews for *The People's Temple*, also worked together pretty exclusively when they did their interviews for *The Laramie Project*. They're a really wonderful team, really extremely earnest and intelligent people. They interviewed some of the key figures who [appeared on segments of] *Nightline* and *Dateline* and [in other films and documentaries] that have been done about this event.

But I think they found a lot people who weren't willing to talk. The same thing that happened with *Laramie* happened [with *The People's Temple*]: one person talks to somebody and they have a great feeling and they say, "I really

think these people are doing something good, so you should talk to them. It's not what it was before or we hope it's not what it is has been before."

CD: The interviewees felt the acting company would do something different with it?

KS: I really think it had to do with the trust that Leigh and Greg built with them. I think theater is a very different medium than film and television. [Film and television interviewing] with video cameras and lights has a very specific connotation to it, as opposed to sitting down with someone with an audio tape and trying to make a theater piece out of it.

In addition to talking with survivors and the relatives of people who died in Jonestown, the acting company went through thousands of documents housed in the California Historical Society related to The Peoples Temple. For Simpkins and her fellow actors, figuring out the best ways to incorporate the vast amount of material that had been collected during the past twenty-five years proved quite a challenge:

KS: I mean there's all the research – there's just so much with any of this kind of work. *The People's Temple* wasn't like *The Laramie Project* which was such an immediate event that you didn't have that historical context for it. *The Laramie Project* was happening as we were doing it in a lot of ways. But with *The People's Temple* there are just so many articles and television programs and the

fictional movie with Powers Booth. We had binders and binders and binders, so just getting the point by point of what happened was a challenge – who was in it, why people came, and what politically was going on at the time in the Bay Area.

The research was really fantastic, leading up to Jim Jones being elected to the Housing Commission and having all these people as a big voting block – he became this political magnet once he moved to San Francisco. Even those little things that went into pumping this movement up were wonderfully revelatory for me.

You know the change for me is always listening to the people have some real kind of *heart moment* of trying to understand. I think it was Leigh's intention pretty early on – and I might be putting words in her mouth – but I think it was her intention for the audience to have the experience of “*I can understand why they were there.*” Pretty early on in the play, I think everyone who's been involved in this realizes: “I can understand or I can relate to this person or these ten people and I can understand how something like this would happen.”

Not only do audience members of a theater of testimony production experience new insights in the theater, but, as numerous scholars and performers can attest, embodying a real person, particularly a person with whom an actor has established a relationship, can enhance an actor's understanding of the person and her or his situation. For Simpkins, observing, listening, and learning about her characters has a profound effect on how she views their lives and the situations they've encountered:

KS: Getting inside the head of the characters I've played, listening to them talk about this, and watching from the perspective of 25 years later what they had done and all the obstacles they had in putting their lives back together – some of them willingly and some unwillingly – profoundly effects how [I] look at an event like that. Playing a real person leads to knowing [that event] internally and knowing all the machinations that went into it – though no one will ever truly, truly know what happened. Connecting with one if not more people who were there leads to the realization that, “Wow I can see that; I can see why you would be so happy to be there.”

CD: I'm curious – did you play anyone who had died?

KS: I did, actually – a woman named Annie Moore. We did a workshop at the Magic Theater in San Francisco. That was the first time that a lot of the survivors and family members came to see the show. It was the first “hold your breath, aha” moment and most of them felt really good about what they experienced there. So it was kind of like a flickering flame that actually got lifted up after that that workshop.

During that time we got to go to the California Historical Society where all the documents and files are kept... letters to and from, diaries, photos, newsletters, etc. Everyone in the ensemble seemed emotionally overwhelmed by

this experience of seeing and touching it first-and; you have to wear gloves to pick up anything.

I got to see all the letters, diaries, things that her family had written her, photographs, passport photos, and all the photographs in the United States and photographs from Jonestown. So I had tons and tons and tons of letters from her and became really interested in this Moore family unit. Actually holding a letter she had written . . . it's pretty amazing. Her mother passed away last year and her dad is still alive. Her family put out a book of family letters from Annie, from Carolyn – her sister who also died in Jonestown – and from the mother and father and [Rebecca Moore, a third sister] to all of them. So it's an entire book of history – before she joined, after she joined, when they went down to Jonestown, what they were doing, and what her mission was.

She was a really fascinating young woman and very similar to me – she was 5' 10" and kind of thin. She looked somewhat similar to me, more than all the people that I have played. I [also] talked to people about her, obviously, and talked to her sister, Rebecca Moore, very briefly. Rebecca and her husband have been tremendously helpful. They sent me a copy of the book when I was in Berkeley because [they knew that] I was really trying to create moments and find material to keep her voice alive. That family now has become a really big part of the theater event.

I played four people in the production [in addition to] different voices. We have, as in *The Laramie Project*, people taking narration over, and we sing and

we dance because they had a big interracial choir. We had a choir director and singing practice. We've listened to an album they made. We were able to watch videos of [Temple members] and see photographs [that showed] how amazingly spirited their choir was in terms of getting the congregation up and moving. It was one of those things where people were dancing in the aisles and having cathartic experiences and healings. So there is a lot of that in the play, too.

Simpkins and her fellow actors' research and rehearsal processes culminated in the production that they eventually presented for former Peoples Temple members and relatives of people who died in Jonestown. Simpkins was pleased with the effect that the production had on audience members:

KS: We had a big night where the majority of [survivors and relatives] came to a production – some of them came several times –in Berkeley. Obviously Berkeley and the whole Bay Area still has that resonance of what they have been politically. I think for that time and that time period [the deaths in Jonestown] just devastated that community so much. I think a lot of [the audience members] felt like [the production portrayed them] in a *really good way* – that they were portrayed both realistically and honestly. To this day, it was very emotional for most of them to sit through.

Simpkins, while she recognizes the positive response of the audience members to the play, also notes the challenges in honoring people's stories as well as their critiques of the performance, while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of the playscript. As she explains, doing so requires both empathy and diplomacy:

KS: And still some interviewees expressed [their concern that] "This needs to be in there and that needs to be in there, and you need to think about this." You know, a lot of directives and a lot of questions and [comments like] "You know I have this to say about it." So, as an ensemble you're constantly dealing with those kinds of things, too.

It's hard for people who went through [such an emotional event]. Some of them defected quite early; some of them were still members but didn't go to Jonestown; some of them were there to the end; some of them ran out of the jungle and were there that day that it happened; and some of them were there on the airstrip and got shot. And, you know, they all have a different story.

I think [that one of the most difficult things for them] to understand is what [is involved in making] a theater production – and not even what *artistic license* is, but what is *artistic* about this event. I think that's hard [for community members] to understand because it's their words, it's their lives. And, they have both a stake in it and really, really strong opinions about what [the collective experience] was.

I think you take in the interviewees' information – and I think Leigh has been pretty good about that, as has Greg and some of the other people that were involved in the interviews – [and you] focus on [weaving the information in] if [you] think it is relevant to the play, or in letting it go if it isn't.

But, it *is* hard to say, “I understand that you went through this, and I understand that this is your life, but this is a play.” It's not a documentary. It's not a journalistic piece. It's a *theater* piece.

I think there's a very fine line in what's important to people [depending] on the strength of their convictions.

Although the challenges the actors and playwrights face in creating a theater of testimony piece are significant, tackling them is worth the effort. Simpkins' conviction in the value of such performances stems from her own experience as an actor; in her work she has witnessed first hand the transformative potential of theater of testimony performance, recognizing its ability to function as “a unique way of knowing”:

CD: Do you think that there are things that a person can learn through performance that he or she can't learn in other ways?

KS: What I hear the question being is, “Is there something more provocative or more redeemable about live performance with this kind of subject matter, as opposed to anything else?” *I think there is.*

One of Moisés [Kaufman's] big questions, in fact *the* biggest question that he had before the company went to Laramie, was "Can theater contribute to a dialogue on current events? Can we be part of what is going on in the nation?" And I think that play really [did contribute in that way]. I don't know that anybody knew the extent to which it was going to, but for that play in particular it [did in] very important [ways].

I have talked at high schools and colleges, and worked with students who have done this play, and been at [discussion sessions] afterwards. [In observing] what those kids learn [and] what the audience has gotten out of the passion the kids display, and through talking to some of the original interviewers and performers and the community members, all I can say is . . . I think that theater is a *profoundly communal* experience.

I keep saying that word *profound*, but it is to me; there is nothing like sitting in a room with a community having an experience that is happening live. And I think that if the performers who are performing it have had the experience that I had with *Laramie Project*, and have been lucky enough to have had it with a few of these other things that I have done, it does come through – that knowledge of these people. Even with *The People's Temple*, there are such gross misrepresentations of what happened. I mean, for me I knew nothing about it.

I learn; the audience learns. I mean point to point to point, in a three hour play you learn, "Oh my goodness, the Peoples Temple went through all of this; I didn't know this; I didn't know this; I didn't know this." Certainly you can learn a

lot just from watching that play as you can from watching *Laramie*, but I think you also get what we have experienced as performers working on a piece: by meeting the people [involved in the Peoples Temple], we are changing our minds about the event and the people involved.

CD: The audience understands that, too, in that communal moment?

KS: Yes. What is interesting about this kind of work . . . it truly is about, more often than not, an *epic event* in a journey of *hope* that somehow goes really, really badly. Like there is all of the conflict and all of the tragedy within a community, whether it's a lesbian who has been institutionalized or the Peoples Temple going to Guyana and having that thing go completely awry, or Matthew Shepard being beaten and murdered.

CD: It *is* epic.

KS: An event, an *epic event*, that happens, and a community grappling with the aftermath of what that has done to a community. I think certainly you can read the point by point logistics of a story; no one has to come and see the play to get that. But you can't be *moved*!

You can't be emotionally – I mean, I am emotionally moved all the time reading plays and reading novels – but I think there is something in having that

direct experience with actors. Both the audience and the performer become *witness to each other* in a way and there is a *heart-line* formed that just doesn't occur in other mediums. I don't know how to put it; I wish I could articulate it much more eloquently than that, because it is something I should be thinking about as a performer.

Simpkins' observation that "the audience and the performer become witness to each other" is grounded in her experiences in the theater of testimony form. As noted in the introduction to this interview, Simpkins has worked with three of the most prolific and influential theater of testimony playwrights and directors working in the contemporary theater. I asked Simpkins to compare her experiences in working with Emily Mann, Moisés Kaufman, and Leigh Fondakowski, and to talk a bit about their approaches to the work. For Simpkins, the director's use of "moment work" is a distinguishing feature:

KS: In the thirties the Federal Theatre Project went to the community to get a voice – get the word on the street, and come back and present it. It's an idea as old as civilization in a lot of ways. Emily Mann, especially with *Execution of Justice*, was commissioned to do the piece. I never really asked her [about her approach], but I think it would be fascinating [to do so] because she's a really brilliant woman and a really kind woman. [She differs from Fondakowski and Kaufman because] she does individual work. She does not do the kind of collaboration [that Kaufman and Fondakowski] use in their approaches.

The first person I really worked with was Leigh [Fondakowski] doing *I Think I Like Girls*, before I ever worked with Moisés [Kaufman]. Leigh did *The Laramie Project* with Moisés and was involved with Tectonic a few years before I was. In that collaboration she participated in the birth of this form of moment work. It's such a simple form to seem groundbreaking.

But, even working with Tectonic when we did a workshop in Champagne, all these actors coming in were terrified of doing this kind of work and also really empowered by it. It brings up a lot of questions. It's also really rare for actors to feel like they're truly part of the collaboration. Actors typically have one role and that is to learn their part and make it believable in the context of the whole; they are not there to have a voice outside of that specific filter. With moment work, an actor can have impact, can have vision, [and] can be a part of the dialogue in a meaningful way.

That was one of the shocking things about my involvement with *Execution of Justice*. [Emily Mann did not direct this particular production.] I had been working with Leigh and Moisés pretty much exclusively for the past eight years. I thought, "I want to get out there and work with other directors and do other things and not have to wait four years to see something come to fruition."

One interesting thing for me in working on *Execution of Justice* was that it was really hard to be in a room and not have an opinion. I mean, I had an opinion, but I had no real voice in what was going to transpire on the stage, certainly not in the way I had working with Leigh and Moisés.

CD: That is really interesting. The work you are doing with Tectonic and Leigh Fondakowski provides the opportunity for a voice for the community members, and in a lot of your collaborations as an actor you've had that, too. But then all of a sudden, with *Execution of Justice*, the situation is entirely different.

KS: It's so ironic. I think it is very different with *Execution of Justice*, the play I'm doing now. I was thinking about that last night. This is the only verbatim theater piece that I have done where I haven't been involved in any of the research and don't know anybody portrayed on stage.

As Simpkins noted earlier in her discussion about The People's Temple, conducting research, interviewing community members, and working on the script leads to a very profound experience for the actor. Simpkins explained that spending time with community members, listening to their stories and absorbing as much of their experiences as possible contributed to her ability to perform her roles.

KS: In *The Laramie Project*, we had tapes [of the interviewees], and we had to meet the people that we played, interview the people, and sit in on interviews of the people that we played. We all were highly encouraged to do that, and I did that with every character – became very close even with a few of them.

There is something about that contact, *that human contact*, just listening to them and participating in that interview. But also, you get to see them, and watch

them – see them physically. You get to have an experience with them, an *emotional* experience, especially for *The Laramie Project* because it had just happened; the emotions were still so [raw] and on the surface.

And for *Execution of Justice*, [the people I portray] almost seem more [like] characters even though the events are real and they are real people. There is that in the back of my mind – these people are real, these people were in this trial – but there is a distance without having that experience, without actually being a part of that trial, or being a part of that interviewing process.

I think you always feel a responsibility, even if [you're playing] a fictional character. [The character] becomes very real to you, in order to have to play [him or her], even though [the person is] not real. It's just like a character on a page and words on a page. But I think that if you have that emotional experience with an interviewee, there is just something about going on stage and performing that person, knowing they might see it. You know, with all of this other verbatim theater work that I have done very similar to [*Execution of Justice*], the interviewees have all come and seen it.

Simpkins considers the effect of both The Laramie Project and The People's Temple on the interviewees and other audience members who attended the production, an effect that is influenced by the current social, cultural, and political climate. Too, she examines the importance to her in being a part of the collaborative development of a theater of

testimony production as well as the privilege (and challenge) in working with Tectonic Theater Project long term:

KS: Certainly you always want the community to be affected, like when we finally took *The Laramie Project* to Laramie, Wyoming for that week. I don't know that I will ever experience, or any of us will ever experience, the feeling that we had before we went on stage at the University of Wyoming for the first time.

Speaking of *The Laramie Project*, doing it for *that* community – [a community that] has been the mirror for a community at large, or the nation at large – it's a really wonderful thing if they love it. But I think ultimately, especially for Leigh with *The People's Temple*, [the impact] has so many things to do with what we are dealing with presently, politically, socially, culturally – what's going on now *and* what happened in Jonestown.

[The two shows are] certainly not the same, but I think for [audiences of *The People's Temple*] you want people in the world to be – I don't know what Leigh's words would be – but to be *moved* and to really *understand* that these were human beings.

I think there's a greater responsibility and a larger intensity when you're performing like that for the first time, knowing that those people are sitting in the audience. If this 2007 cast had done *Execution of Justice* for the first time at Berkeley Rep, which the original cast did 24 years ago, I think it would have been a very similar experience to presenting *The People's Temple* in Berkeley.

Also, when you work in the way that we work, there is a sense of being a part of the collaboration that you just don't get in traditional rehearsal processes: really being involved in the measuring out of the material and having opinions about it, and talking about the interviews, and reading other people's material, and sitting around in a room and just dialoging about it – either the narrative arc, or whether this character needs to be here, or whether they even need to be in at all, or what they say, or fighting for people when there's a finished script.

You don't feel the same – for me personally – in a traditional rehearsal process. I don't feel the same kind of ownership over that experience. And it's not even like I own that experience, but I have been a part of creating that experience, whatever it is – even if I don't direct it. Even if I didn't do any of the interviews, I'm in the room dealing with these people, creating moment work and really being involved in the collaborative process.

I think that is a *really rare experience*. I said earlier that I've wanted to be cast in other shows, have less responsibility because it is really, really difficult in moments. Then, you get to the other things that you've been longing for and you realize “Oh, well that's not as much fun, not as compelling or as meaningful.” It is *easier* because the director says, “You go here and you sit here and you do the thing and you go off stage” – and it seems fairly simple.

CD: It sounds like you're going to always be drawn to this kind of work. I don't think you are going to be able to escape it.

KS: Yeah! I don't know – in fact, Moisés has said a couple times, “You know you should get some people in a room; you should find an idea that you like, and you should direct something.” And I don't know if that will ever happen, but I think that is, to me, part of this work, too. You really begin to see the expression of your own voice, and that sometimes there's something unique there for you to say. You get the opportunity to do that.

And also, [working] with people over the long haul that have this kind of longevity with a theater company – even though we all work in very different ways and go off and do different things – coming together with this group of amazingly talented and intelligent people that I've been privileged to work with for the past eight years is just a really rare experience.

You love them and have complications with them but it's always really cool to be back in a room with them. I think that's hard to find. I mean, there were such wonderful actors in *Execution of Justice*, and we had a great time, but we don't have that history together. And it's really amazing when you do. I don't know if a year ago if I would have said that. I think being away from New York and being away from that kind of process for a year now really made me miss it. If I got back there, maybe for six months, maybe I'd want to go away again.

CD: Exactly. There's the trust that comes with working with people long term in a creative endeavor.

KS: Absolutely! I think, too, part of just talking about this makes me want to say that I think it's such an *atypical* model for the American theater. For example, my girlfriend is in a show now that they put up in twelve days. They had a twelve day rehearsal process, one week of previews, and they opened last night!

It feels like a really special event when you have the opportunity to continue working on something [for a much longer period], creating with a lot of the same people in a room for a long period of time – it just doesn't happen often and I know [actors] wish it would happen more.

In a lot of ways the way we work is a wonderful gift. It's really hard to do unless you have the money and the grants and the name recognition that Tectonic does now, and that Moisés does now, and that Leigh does now. I think it's really, really difficult to proceed without that and that's the [discouraging] part of it.

Simpkins' work with Kaufman and Fondakowski gave her the opportunity to interview community members in two different temporal/historical contexts: in Wyoming, Kaufman's company interviewed citizens within months of Shepard's death; in California, Fondakowski's company interviewed survivors and victims' relatives after a twenty-five year lapse. Simpkins considers how the historical context of a production and the passage of time influence its reception by the audience:

CD: You know, I think you're in a unique situation having worked on *The People's Temple* and *The Laramie Project*. I'm wondering from your perspective – as a

person involved intimately in both productions – what the passage of time does for the theatrical moment, if anything?

For example, if somebody went to Laramie twenty years from now to create a play, do you think it would be any different? Tectonic went there almost immediately and got what people were thinking in 1998, before they had twenty years of looking back. It seems to me, not that Laramie has faded away, but that the Peoples Temple is more mythologized even than Laramie.

KS: Absolutely. I think the difference [between] both of those is that one young man died and nine hundred and twenty people died.

And the impact of that . . . I don't know. I mean it is a really great question. I don't know how to answer it. But it's such a compelling provocative question because I've never truly thought about it – like in terms of working on both of these pieces, one being so, so distant and one being immediate.

I think the difference for me as a performer has to do with the immediacy of creating a theater piece around Matthew Shepard's death – what became such a landmark, watershed moment. I think what Tectonic is really wonderful at in so many ways is really dealing with a historical moment and knowing that theater can really be part of a dialogue about what's happening. That was Moisés' question about *The Laramie Project*. Can the theater contribute to a dialogue on current events?

Can we be a part of that *exactly right in this moment* – immediately as people are talking about this at the water cooler and as the country is changing about this issue based on this one young man – [something that] had never happened before. The Peoples Temple has such a legacy and has so much pain. I mean it completely devastated a community. You hear people talk about this – I was seven years old when it happened and I certainly had no idea what Berkeley was like or what the Bay Area was like. You have so many African American people that were interviewed who talked about the loss of that community, and what they could have been, and what they could have done, not [just] in terms of legislation or politics. It just wiped out the African American community in San Francisco.

I think that part of our responsibility is to help people understand that, not as a “current event,” but in a *real heart way*. I keep saying that, but you know, the critical question is, “What can we do to contribute to the understanding that these were human beings – that they weren’t crazy people?” I think because there was such a massive amount of people who died, they all got pushed into one clump and they were dehumanized. They weren’t individuals anymore; they were just a crazy clump of people that we don’t have to care about or think about as real.

Simpkins concludes with her reflection on the power of theater in contemporary society – its potential not only to contribute to the national discourse but also to provide the opportunity for the silenced and the marginalized to have their voices heard:

KS: Part of the beauty for me both in both *The People's Temple* and *Laramie* is humanizing these people – giving voice to the people who never had a voice, giving voice to the people who died there who didn't get a chance to tell their part of the story, giving voice to the people who left or who have been dealing with this still for the last 25 years.

And every time an anniversary comes along these issues reemerge. Leigh and Greg did several interviews with Jim Jones' biological son and one of my assignments was to read through all of his interviews and highlight anything that was relevant. This man has truly, truly been through, as many people have, a spiritual resurrection in the last 25 years, really grappling and groping and putting his ass on the line in terms of how he contributed to [the events in Jonestown].

It is truly a loss if we don't actually get to see these people as human beings with individual voices, with hopes and dreams and fears and love; no one really has done that before. I know that still doesn't answer your question.

CD: No, it does. I love the way that you phrase it – “giving these people voice” – because I think many people would say, “Well, you know, who cares, it's been 25 years.” But I think we *have* to care about what they think and what they went through and who they are. I think one of the important things about this kind of work is not only what it does for the audience, or what it does for the actor, but also what it can do to honor communities. That's equally important . . . maybe most important.

KS: I think anything less than a true human exploration of those 900-plus beings who died there – an attempt to reveal their humanity – means that it was all just in vain. And it wasn't in vain. There's a song at the end of *The People's Temple* called "Walk a Mile in My Shoes." The song begins with the line

"If I could be you, if you could be me, for just an hour.

If we could find a way to get inside each others' minds"

In a way, that is what theater is – finding a way to embrace and investigate humanity, even in its most frightening forms, its most fragile states so that it becomes almost unbearable to dismiss any one of us . . . that is what I hope comes out of *The People's Temple*.

Every action has power; every person has worth; every voice has eloquence. We just need to ask the questions "who are you?" "why?" "how did that happen?" "what did you think?" "how have you changed?" and on and on and simply *listen* to the answers. For every verbatim, ensemble driven theatre piece I've had the privilege of working on, that has been the connective tissue.

CHAPTER 4: *COMMITTED*: COLLABORATIVE THEATER OF TESTIMONY

PERFORMANCE AS CRITICAL PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY

“How can I summon for you here my own experience of the simultaneity of time that infuses my argument, and that I feel during my richest, most memorable visits to the theater, many of which I want to conjure for you in these pages?” (Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 9)

It perhaps comes as no surprise that Simpkins, an intelligent, passionate, sophisticated, empathic, and tireless professional actor, one who is connected with the best and brightest directors working today, speaks so eloquently about the power of collaborative theater of testimony performance. Her testimony validates the claims of the performance theorists discussed in an earlier chapter – for Simpkins, a *performance of possibilities* is a reality. But, what of the potential of collaborative theater of testimony for the amateur actor? For amateur actors who are both the subjects of a piece and actors in it? For audiences of small budget productions that take place in rural areas, in non-theater spaces, without the support of professional playwrights, directors, actors, and designers? Can such performances matter in as profound a manner as the performances Simpkins describes? In this chapter, I explore these questions based on my experience as the director of an original theater of testimony piece, *Committed*, created collaboratively with student actors and inmate actors in south central Virginia. The impetus for the production began, although I did not know it at the time, thirty years ago, during my junior year in high school.

In 1978, teacher Edith Smoak performed a radical act. In a small town in coastal Georgia, she gathered together her Brunswick High School psychology students and placed a label on each student's forehead, not disclosing the wording on the label to the student. Throughout the subsequent class discussion, when a student offered a comment, Ms. Smoak responded in accord with the directive on the student's forehead. Eventually, it was my turn to participate. When I smugly answered a question (after all, I was an honor student and well-prepared for class), she mocked me – how could I possibly think that? When I protested, she insulted me – I obviously had not prepared. When I raised my voice as only a petulant sixteen year old can do, she promptly put me in my place. Some of my classmates laughed – in retrospect, I realized that those laughing were the ones wearing the labels of “respect me,” “praise me,” “agree with me,” and “ask my opinion.” My label read “ridicule me.” Five years later, I became a teacher, inspired by Ms. Smoak's always inventive, always participatory, always challenging “object lessons.”

Long before I encountered discussions of “critical performance pedagogy” in scholarly literature, I had experienced it firsthand, as had scores of students in creative classrooms across the country. Little did I know that my most rewarding – and often most challenging– teaching experiences would incorporate such strategies. In this chapter I examine the integration of critical performance pedagogy and collaborative theater of testimony performance in my own work as a professor at Hampden-Sydney College in south central Virginia.

In the fall semester of 2006, I led a handful of students from this all-male liberal arts college beyond the rolling athletic fields, huge oaks, and Federalist style buildings of

our rural campus through the razor-wire fence, concrete walls, and thick metal doors of Piedmont Regional Jail in Farmville, Virginia. There I proposed to lead theater students and male inmates enrolled in an acting course at the jail in a service-learning project focused on theater of testimony performance. Together, under my direction, students and inmates would create their own theater of testimony piece drawn from the personal narratives of the participants as shared with me in one-on-one interviews and in group discussion.

One of the more frequently cited definitions of service-learning first appeared in a 1996 article by Bringle and Hatcher:

We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (222)

Service-learning benefits both students and community partners. First, it allows students to link academic learning with experiences in the larger community. Second, it provides students with a model for lifelong civic engagement. Third, it fulfills a demonstrated need in the community. And, finally, in partnerships such as ours it provides college students, often members of privileged groups, the opportunity to dispel stereotypes they may hold about members of marginalized groups.

Mehra asserts that the requisite collaboration among service-learning participants both empowers people in marginalized groups and fosters acceptance of difference by those in privileged groups. He argues that “empowerment will emerge from an acknowledgment (self and social) of the worth and contribution of every individual participating in the collaboration; larger inequalities will get addressed by providing [community partners] with the resources to resist their marginalized status” (9).

Indeed, as I will discuss below, my students of privilege discovered again and again the similarities between themselves and the inmates with whom they worked. Because our students and the inmates were engaged in a common task – creating a performance piece – and were reliant upon one another’s individual contributions for the success of the project, a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect soon developed.

While I was primarily interested in the potential of service-learning to enhance students’ academic learning, I was also interested in this particular performance-centered service-learning project for another reason: It would give me the opportunity to explore firsthand performance studies scholars’ assertions, as outlined in Chapter Two of this work, that performance possesses transformative potential for subjects, actors, and audience members.

Of particular significance to our collaborative theater of testimony performance project was the stipulation that each actor would portray the role of another, embodying his counterpart both physically and vocally, so that, as one inmate participant noted, he might “walk in another man’s shoes.” In effect, in performing their partner’s personal narratives, students would embody inmates, and inmates would embody students. While

there are sound reasons for engaging in autobiographical personal narrative performance, including disrupting master narratives (Corey 250); allowing a person to work through traumatic events (Spry 254); generating analyses of “complex structures of cultural power” (Hantzis 206); “ending [one’s] silence and invisibility” (Kendig 4); and “reflecting upon and discovering meaning in past experience” (Kendig 4), I felt the participants would benefit more by embodying in performance a person they viewed as quite different from themselves, someone they’d likely stereotyped according to the myriad of representations in the media and elsewhere. In choosing to work with inmates, I’d chosen a population seemingly quite disparate from the mostly upper-middle class, white, southern, politically conservative eighteen and nineteen year olds in the theater course selected for the project. At first glance it seemed the only commonality was that all of the participants (excluding me) were male.

Because I’d facilitated a service-learning project linking students and inmates a couple of years prior to this project, I realized that the students' views of inmates were influenced by images of criminals presented in the media and popular culture. Kathryn Russell, in *The Color of Crime*, notes the widely held, but inaccurate view, that Blacks are responsible for the majority of crime (111). She attributes the public’s skewed perspective, in part, to the media. As examples she points to images of black suspects in “reality” police television programs cursing and harassing police officers, black men in rap music videos engaging in activities associated with drug dealing, and black men presented on the nightly television news as the perpetrators of violent street crime (2).

She points to rhetoric, too, as partly responsible for the misperceptions: the term

“Black on Black crime,” for example, in a search of LEXIS/NEXIS articles yielded over one thousand articles, while a search with the terms “White Crime” or “White-on-White crime” yielded fewer than fifty (115). Russell speculates that “[t]he skewed focus on black crime by journalists and academics may simply reflect society's skewed concern with street crime. By this reasoning, because Blacks *are* (italics added) responsible for a disproportionate amount of street crime, they receive a disproportionate amount of attention by academics and the media” (116). While this rationale might explain the attention paid to crimes committed by Blacks, it does not explain why so little media attention is focused on crimes committed by Whites.

The point is that the students – each of whom was white, male, and upper middle class – likely viewed the incarcerated participants in our upcoming project in abstractions and stereotypes, in keeping with Russell’s findings above. I suspected that the students, too, had begun to “other” the inmates, first aggregating the inmates on the basis of race and socio-economic status or what they assumed would be the inmates’ statuses (incarcerated, Black, and poor) and then dichotomizing them into a group of people essentially different from themselves (Rosenblum and Travis). Similarly, Hampden-Sydney College’s reputation as a conservative men’s school for white, rich, “southern boys” was well known throughout the region. In fact, many of our inmate partners likely would have seen the contested bumper sticker which reads, “Hampden-Sydney College: Where Men are Men and Women are Guests.” I suspected that the inmates expected the Hampden-Sydney men to fit the stereotype – a suspicion that was corroborated during several discussions throughout our collaboration.

To what extent would the participants' similarities and differences affect the performance process? Perhaps enrich it? I trusted Pineau's assertion, as discussed earlier in Chapter Two, that "[e]very time that we ask students [or inmates] to perform across gender, ethnic, or generational lines we have the opportunity to unpack their resistance to the unfamiliar, their stereotypic assumptions about how others move through the world, as well as to confront their own habituated responses and experiences" ("Performance Studies" 133).

In this chapter, I examine the extent to which Pineau's and others' assertions were realized in our project, the challenges of working in a jail, and the performance piece that resulted from our collaboration. I explore the ways in which *collaborative* performance processes (including initial research, script development, rehearsal, and performance) allow the acquisition of knowledge for inmates, students, and audiences involved in such projects. Lassiter describes this form of performance process as "a reciprocal and collaborative practice that involves academic faculty, students, *and* community members in the processes of representation from beginning to end, from ethnographic research to performance" (*italics in the original*) (Papa and Lassiter 162).

In my discussion to follow, my primary concern, as stated in the Introduction, is with the shared experience of participants during both the early phases of interviews and discussions, text development, and rehearsal, as well as the final performance phase – their interactions, self-discoveries, and disruptions of preconceptions and stereotypes about one another. To a somewhat lesser degree, I will explore the audience response to the performance itself, examining the potential of performance to subvert the cultural

assumptions associated with people from the community/communities of interest, in our case, two all-male “enclaves” – Hampden-Sydney College and the men’s housing units at Piedmont Regional Jail. In my discussion I will draw on critical performance pedagogy theory, the work of theater scholars and practitioners, the performance script we created, student blogs, conversations with participants – inmates, students, and audience members⁸ – and my production log.

Service-learning, Prison Theater, and the Possibilities of Performance

But, first, I want to address what motivated me to undertake the project. Why engage in service-learning, a process that is far “messier” than traditional classroom work, and further, why partner with inmates, knowing that to do so means dealing with the vicissitudes of jail life – lockdowns, fluctuating populations, varying degrees of inmates’ literacy, security concerns, and numerous other constraints? Several reasons, including, simply, my desire to return to directing after an eight year hiatus, during which time I’d been teaching public speaking. I knew from previous directing experiences the transformative and emancipatory potential of the theater, and a sabbatical in 2006 provided me with the perfect opportunity to pursue a performance project.

There were weightier reasons as well: over the course of eight years at Hampden-Sydney College, I came to realize that the homogeneous demographic of the student body – not only all-male, but also overwhelmingly white, affluent, politically conservative, heterosexual, and Southern – limits the opportunity for students to interact with people significantly, or even somewhat, different from themselves.⁹ As a result, students’ attitudes toward difference, including differences stemming from race and ethnicity,

socioeconomic class, sex, and sexual orientation, range from indifference to intolerance to, in the case of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, hate, as manifested in verbal attacks against gay and African American students and vandalism of their personal property.¹⁰

The 2008 final report of the Hampden-Sydney College Intercultural Affairs Committee concluded, based on data gathered from focus groups with gay and African American students, that neither group perceived the college to be “an accepting environment.” In fact, “the transcript of the focus group this year with African American students came as a shock and disappointment to the Committee. It was the most negative that we have received in four years.” Even more disturbing, the report indicates that the newly elected (for the 2008-2009 year) Student Court chairman “has chosen to publicly identify himself, not only as a member but as an administrator, with a group that is openly homophobic.”¹¹ I felt it was appropriate and necessary, as Dolan suggests in *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*, to use performance to “stage arguments . . . to open a community to itself and the world in ways that are dangerous, visceral, compelling, and moving” (64). It was my hope that, as Kaufman postulates in his introduction to *The Laramie Project*, theater could be a means by which we could, in our small community, “contribute to the national dialogue on current events” (12), specifically dialogue concerning issues related to difference.

The profile of our student body is especially noteworthy, given our location. Farmville, the town outside the college gates, is also home to a National Historic Landmark, the Robert R. Moton Museum, site of a 1951 walkout organized by African

American students to protest poor facilities at the all-black Moton High School that eventually culminated with Prince Edward County's inclusion in the groundbreaking Brown vs. Board of Education decision.¹² While I had no sure way of knowing the demographic of the inmates who might participate in our project, discussions with Lewis Barlow, Piedmont Regional Jail Superintendent coupled with my own research suggested that the inmate population would likely represent the demographic of the region, a region that is racially and socioeconomically diverse, with eighteen percent of its families living below the poverty line.¹³ As it turned out, two African American inmates and one white inmate participated in the acting class at the jail. Four Hampden-Sydney students participated in the project, all of whom are white.

Earlier service-learning work that a colleague and I completed at Piedmont Regional Jail, a collaborative documentary photography project with inmates and students, had proved pedagogically successful and personally rewarding, and had opened the door for future jail projects.¹⁴ That collaboration, which resulted in the exhibition *Living with Conviction*, pointed up the transformative potential of the arts: the experience of art-making with their inmate partners had indeed challenged our students' perspectives about difference while it introduced them to the rewards and responsibilities of civic engagement.¹⁵ Additionally, inmate participants found that photography, specifically self-portraiture, provided them an opportunity to connect with the outside world and to challenge the public's stereotypes of "inmate";¹⁶ community members who attended the exhibition indicated that the work did, indeed, encourage them to examine those assumptions. As noted above, I knew from prior directing work that theater held the

same, if not greater potential; pursuing the project seemed a “win-win” situation for all involved.

An important element in both service-learning and critical performance pedagogy is the element of reflection. As Pineau reminds us, “Critical performative pedagogy combines acute physical awareness . . . with thoughtful consideration of the implication of those body sensations” (“Performance Studies” 133). To aid participants’ reflexivity, I encouraged frequent group discussion and informal conversation throughout our three-month collaboration at the jail. Too, student participants were required to submit a blog after each session to chart their impressions and analyses of the work; in turn, I kept a production log throughout the project.¹⁷ These written reflections proved a valuable resource in helping participants, myself included, process our experiences.

The inmate participants in the project were selected from men who expressed interest in an acting course that I offered at the jail. Jail administrators screened the applications (only inmates who were not considered a security risk and who would be incarcerated for at least the next four months were eligible) and gave permission for six men to participate; each inmate actor received permission to travel outside the jail (with an officer) for performances. Although we started out with six inmates in the acting course, three dropped out after the first day, two because they learned they would be released before the performance date and one because our rehearsal times conflicted with his work schedule at the jail.

The student participants in the project were enrolled in a theater course (although not all the men were fine arts majors) taught by my friend and colleague, Prof. Shirley

Kagan. The course focused on political theater and included examples of theater of testimony works by Emily Mann (*Execution of Justice*), Anna Deavere Smith (*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*), and Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project (*The Laramie Project*), among others.

As presented at length in earlier chapters, theater of testimony performance has the potential to empower the *subjects* whose stories are performed, to transform the *actors* who embody those subjects, and to enlighten *audience* members who share in the performance. And, as Kelli Simpkins so eloquently attests, when the performer *knows* the person she embodies in performance, that transformative potential is heightened. In such collaborative theater of testimony performances, as noted in an earlier chapter, the boundaries between interviewers, dramaturgs, community members, actors, and director overlap. In our project at Piedmont Regional Jail, student and inmate actors participated equally in all facets of the production, thus maintaining control of how they were represented on stage. Such empowerment was especially critical for the inmate participant whose incarceration separated him not only physically from home and family, but also, as Kendig notes, emotionally from his own sense of identity (par.7). In a sense, prison imposes labels upon inmates – “ignore me,” “marginalize me,” or “discount me,” labels with real and lasting effects on identity. Working as equals with students, collaborative performance processes allow inmates the opportunity to remove the imposed labels and substitute ones of their own choosing.

Kendig, in an account of a performance workshop conducted at a men’s prison, provides an insightful discussion of the incarceration process as a “rite of passage,”

following Arnold van Gennep. Kendig looks to Schechner's explanation of the performance process, and notes the analogous phases of separation, transition, and reintegration, a sort of "complementary rite." Kendig demonstrates that performance's potential is threefold, providing inmates with "a way of learning or knowing about social life, a way of reflecting upon and discovering meaning in experience, and a way of acting upon and transforming the world and self."

Behind the Scenes: Creating the Performance Text

In late August, 2006, Professor Kagan provided the groundwork for our performance project by leading her students in an examination of several theater of testimony scripts in combination with political theater theory, notably the work of Brazilian theorist, director, and social activist Augusto Boal.¹⁸ In early October, I joined the group to facilitate the service-learning component of the course, thereby providing students with the opportunity to experience first hand the curriculum they'd studied in class, thus linking theory and practice. Over the next three months, students, inmates, and I spent significant amounts of time together, engaging in both structured and informal discussions, acting exercises, script development, rehearsals and performance.

Our first trip to the jail made quite an impression on the students, as Josh Jarrett, a sophomore fine arts major from Farmville, described in his blog:

When we first arrived at the prison I felt, for the first time in the whole process, uncomfortable. I paid it no mind. I figured it was normal to have that feeling when entering a feared and misunderstood place for the first time. . . . After a brief talk with the supervisor about his expectations of us,

our partners, and the piece itself I began to feel a great kind of anticipation. The anticipation, however, still could not hide the uneasiness of being in such a place.

His trepidation recalls Simpkins' discussion of the fear and unease that the members of Tectonic Theater Project experienced when they first traveled to Laramie to begin work on *The Laramie Project*. Similarly, the Hampden-Sydney men were nervous, though they tried hard not to show it! Josh describes moving from corridor to corridor, being "buzzed in and out of the various chambers" as "the kind of stuff you only see in movies." When we arrived in the booking area, Josh¹⁹ was forced to confront his fear:

We walked in only to have them all, men and women, staring right back at us. I truly felt an air of hate in that room, hate and jealousy. It was as if they were all trying to say to us "get out you tourist bastards!" The feeling of people who hated you simply because of who you were gave me, for the first time in my life, a sense of discrimination and hopelessness. As we went down the main hallway to the main cells we heard calls from the various citizens of the facility which served to unnerve me even more if that were possible. Even in the control room I didn't feel safe. I actually felt as though they were still watching me, despite my being in a safe place meant to observe them.

Another student, Chase Young, a senior English major from Martinsville, Virginia, described his impression of the tour, specifically the view from one of many surveillance rooms, a small glassed-in room that overlooked several "pods" housing male

inmates and contained video monitors that showed images of other hallways and rooms in the jail. Two women sat in front of a large panel, operating numerous buttons and levers that controlled the doors and gates throughout the jail. A constant chatter from their radios provided the only noise in the room. The students were silent. Chase wrote:

We were allowed to observe . . . the inmates in their daily routines. It was alarming to realize the total lack of privacy that really exists inside those walls. The urinal and toilet are just wide in the open, but I guess you learn to not be shy after a while. The [surveillance] room itself seemed a little surreal with all the cameras and buttons; looking at the videos almost obscures your reality a bit. Spending time in this “watch-tower” made me realize how monotonous prison life can be.

The students’ nervousness abated a bit when we finally met our inmate acting partners. Because space is at a premium at Piedmont Regional Jail – the new, large multi-purpose room that was to have been our rehearsal and performance space had been converted to a housing unit the summer prior to our project – we were directed to the video conference room, a 4’ X 15’ re-purposed hallway with a television, a camera, a phone, and a few folding chairs along the walls. The men sat across from one another, their knees touching. Josh explains that “when [the inmates] arrived we exchanged greetings, discussed the project, talked music and sports like familiar acquaintances or even friends. Our conversations calmed me and when we left I felt that I could walk those halls now with at least an understanding and respect for what those men and women have to go through.”

While I silently grappled with how in the world we could put together a play in a 4' X 15' room, the students found a silver lining in the cramped quarters. As Chase notes, “by placing us all in this room we were able to be on the same footing as the rest of the guys.” Greg Mascavage, a junior economics major from Charlotte, North Carolina, wrote:

The “room of confinement” would definitely be a title or at least a chapter in today’s visit to the jail. I feel like it was almost better to be in such a confined space. It was great to have so many crammed together, especially free men and criminals. We did not separate, but rather integrated. I loved that; it made us come to one, equal playing field.

Of course, we weren’t on an equal playing field, a fact that the students and I discussed at length throughout the semester. Greg’s comment reflected one of the ethical pitfalls that Conquergood cautions against, “The Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” whereby the ethnographer, or, the actor in this case, focuses primarily on the similarities between himself and others. In so doing, the differences, and, importantly, the social and political circumstances that contributed to the very different situations of students and inmates, are trivialized. In retrospect, I needed to spend much more time with students and inmates in discussions about race, class, and the systemic conditions that lead to the inequities in the United States criminal justice system, inequities such as the higher incarceration rates of African Americans above Whites. Too, given more time together, pointed discussions of “white privilege” would have proven instructive, and I regret that because our time together was so limited we were not able to address these issues more fully.

After brief introductions, I explained the project in a bit more detail and showed the group short video clips from Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and Eve Ensler's *What I Want My Words To Do To You* (a writing/performance project that Ensler directed with women inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility) as examples of the type of work we'd be doing together. Our discussion then turned to life inside all-male enclaves, including the similarities and differences between the jail and Hampden-Sydney. The conversation was rather mundane – discussions of cafeteria/jail food, leisure time activities, favorite movies and television shows (with *Prison Break* getting high marks from the men at the jail), the absence of women, etc. – not unlike what I'd expected for our initial visit. Our visit ended with handshakes all around and a sense of anticipation of what was to come. Later, when I interviewed inmate participants Eric Cheatham (Chesterfield, VA), Robert Davis (Lynchburg, VA), and Tim White (Lunenburg, VA) about their impressions of the performance project, they had this to say about our first meeting:

CD: What was that like for you, getting to spend time with [the students] throughout the project?

RD: It was wild, 'because . . . when I first met them, I didn't, you know, they all, you know, rich college boys. But after you get to know them, you understand them better. It's like when they first met us.

CD: You mean their impression of you?

RD: Yeah, “they’re hardened criminals,” but really we’re not, you know.

TW: Yeah, at first, they were scared to death when they first met us.
(RD laughs)

CD: How could you tell?

TW: Because, the way they was acting – like, they didn’t have really much to say. But, after we got starting to get to know them, it was like, yeah, they was pretty cool, this and that.

EC: I wouldn’t have never known that. ‘Cause I didn’t see through that at first.

CD: That they were scared?

EC: No, I didn’t. So, I was . . . if they didn’t never said that I wouldn’t have never known.

CD: So they covered it up for you pretty well?

EC: Yeah, they did. They done a good job for me.

CD: (to Tim). But you saw it?

TW: (nods) ‘Cause, like I said, if you be around somebody you can tell, just by they impression, how they is, know what I’m saying? But like I said, with Evan [Evan Nasteff, another student], at first he was, he was like: (Tim demonstrates by looking around nervously.) (Robert laughs). Then after a while he started talking, you know what I’m saying.

RD: Yeah.

TW: He started figuring everybody out, you know, see how everybody was.

RD: (nodding) More comfortable acting.

EC: I didn't pick it up like that, I don't know. I was kind of, I was kind of skeptical at first, but I said, "Shoot, ain't nobody no different than other people on the street. People are people wherever you go."

RD: Yeah.

EC: You know, so I get along with anybody, anyway. That's the person I am.

Over the next couple of weeks we began the work of script development, drawing material from large group discussions, acting exercises, and one-on-one interviews that I conducted with each of the participants. Throughout our discussions, I was cognizant of the fact that an interview itself is a performance event, a "way of writing the world," comprised of moments where meaning is created between participants (Denzin, *Performance Ethnography* 80-81). Langellier and Peterson explain that people tell stories in everyday life in order to "make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations" (1). In other words, the personal narratives shared by the students and inmates were not objective representations of experience, but rhetorical retellings of experiences with intended effect. Wood provides an example of such effects:

[W]e may want to persuade others to see us as adventurous, honest, loyal, engaging, and so forth; we may intend to convince others that our view of a situation is the correct one; we may want to convince others that we live interesting lives; we may want others to regard us as standing up for the right values; we may want others to gain some insight into experiences we have had but they have not. (128)

I was also cognizant that as a white woman, a lesbian, a professor, and the facilitator of the project, my presence alone would influence the encounters. In light of these observations, I approached the work of the project following, as I discussed in the Introduction, what Denzin refers to as a “feminist, communitarian moral ethic,” honoring and respecting the men and the stories they were willing to share with me.

The question that initially framed much of my discussion with participants was “what do you want people on the outside to know about you, the institution, and life on the inside?” For the inmates, the most prevalent response was that, in spite of media representations to the contrary, not all inmates are the same. As Robert stated, “Usually male criminals are always displayed like they’re a bunch of violent criminals, not like, say, some guys who are in for a couple of months or something.” The Hampden-Sydney College men also felt that dispelling stereotypes was critical, especially those stereotypes that categorized an all-male school as an all-gay school and Hampden-Sydney College men as preppy, spoiled, conservative, rich kids. One of the most amusing depictions, which we incorporated into the performance text, came from Josh, a student who grew up in Prince Edward County: “Well, since my friends and I are all from around Farmville

and we know how Hampden-Sydney's like, we didn't think it was a gay school or anything – we just thought it was a place where people go in good guys and come out assholes.”

I also made it a point to ask the participants to tell me about important turning points in their lives, encouraging them to search for what Ulmer refers to as the “punctum” or “sting of memory” (209) to recreate those experiences. Too, I asked participants to talk about significant influences in their lives – people or events – and their aspirations for the future. Some of the most poignant moments of the performance centered on these life stories; these stories, in turn, served to dispel the misconceptions the audience held about the two groups.

The several weeks we spent together sharing stories, learning about acting, hanging out together, and collaborating on the script brought the group closer together and instilled in participants a collective sense of purpose. The Hampden-Sydney students wrote often about the group's coalescence, their impressions of the process, and their insights about their partners and themselves, sometimes surprising me with the details they noticed. For example, Greg found a point of connection with Eric – earlier, when I interviewed Greg about his work on the rescue squad, he choked up when describing the first time he had to deal with a death. It was Greg's responsibility to inform a young man that his father wasn't going to make it, an extremely difficult conversation for Greg to have. Eric, too, displayed his vulnerability when he spoke about his grandmother's illness. After this discussion, Greg wrote in his blog: “I was sitting right near Eric and [saw] him tear up the way I did when I spoke on a tough situation in my own interview.”

Similarly, Chase noticed something about Robert that he later incorporated in the production when he portrayed Robert:

Robert clutched a letter throughout today's meeting and as his eyes focused upon it frequently it seemed as though his thoughts were too. A great deal of the strength these guys have undoubtedly comes from support from friends and family, otherwise such a situation would be almost unbearable in my opinion. . . . Today I realized how much one's freedom is essential to a fulfilled life, and with this feeling came the guilt of enjoying a beautiful day.

Although there were certainly frustrating moments – it took three more visits to the jail before we finally had a rehearsal space larger than a closet, someone was sick or working in the jail kitchen or commissary and missed rehearsal, meeting times were suddenly cut short, etc. – on the whole we were lucky that things progressed relatively smoothly.

As time went on, what initially was to be a performance piece about life inside two homosocial enclaves quickly morphed into something else – a performance piece about seven men, seven individuals, men who are brothers, uncles, children, fathers, partners, artists, athletes, friends, high school graduates or GED-holders, dreamers, schemers, skilled workers, and, yes, inmates and students. To be frank, the discussions about jail life and college life were rather mundane and unremarkable. The more interesting, enlightening, and, ultimately empowering narratives emerged from discussions of the men's childhood influences, adolescent adventures, adult setbacks and

successes, and aspirations for the future. Several of the men's narratives revolved around a central theme. For example, Robert talked often of his love and respect for his younger brother, a bond that seemed to steady Robert during his incarceration and upon which he builds his hopes for the future. The following excerpts, taken from various scenes in the playscript, illustrate this theme:

Jonathan makes me real proud – 'cause he's got a good head on his shoulders, you know – he's not but 18 and he ain't never been in no trouble. And, uh, he got a baby now. He's paying all the bills for the house, car insurance, whatever, buying food for the house, this and that, so. . . .

As a kid, I was wide open – rebellious. I didn't like to listen to nobody! I always heard, "Once you turn such and such an age you goin' be locked up" and the majority of them was right. I look back at it and I'm locked up the way they said, you know, I'm exactly where they said I'm goin' be at. I kinda look back on it now and say, you know, they *was* right.

Sometimes I look at it in a way that – cause I want *him* to be able to say, "Hey, yeh, that's my older brother, you know, and I love him to death" cause that's what I say about him – "Hey, that's my younger brother and I love him to death." But, but, sometimes I feel like that he don't want to say that because of some of the shit I've done – and he's like "I don't want

nobody knowing he's my brother" – but I don't think it's like that. But, *sometimes* I think it's like that, but I don't know.

It was hard to lose my mom – it wasn't fun that's for sure – to be so young – and, like my brother, he was even younger. And, um, my daddy just passed two months ago – so I know my brother is having a rough time 'cause he was still in the home with my dad at the house. When he passed my brother picked up *all* the bills – everything. Crazy. My brother's got so many people trying – willing to help him out – all my friends. . . and I left like 9,000 dollars when I came – when I got locked up – and I told him that if he needed to use that then go ahead, I didn't care. If I got out of jail tomorrow and didn't have a *dime* left in the bank I wouldn't care, but ... Jon, he's the type that *he don't want no help!* Even if somebody came up to him and said "Here, here's two or three hundred dollars, pay you bills you got, that you need to get paid." "Nah, I don't want y'all's money – I got it, I'm alright, I got it." But, uh, I'm the same way – 'cause I've had a couple of ex-girlfriends tell me since I been locked up "if you need money let me know." "I don't want y'all's money." I guess me and him's the same – we're the *same* way.

(Points to tattoo on left upper arm). "Trevor," that's my nephew. And, "Jon-Jon," that's my brother. Jon-Jon – his name's Jonathan, but we call

him Jon-Jon. “One love” – (pause) ‘cause I’ll always love him – I know he’ll always be there. Cause I seen some dudes got their girlfriend’s name on their arm, this and that, their wife’s name on their arm, whatever, but I’d never do that. But I know my brother will always be there – and my nephew.

After my initial interviews with each participant, we took a two week break during which time I wove together participants’ personal narratives, excerpts of group discussions, and other documents (an excerpt from the Hampden-Sydney College etiquette book, for example) into a first draft of the performance text. When we reconvened – on Halloween day – the group did a read-through of the script, an event which prompted some reworking of the performance text. The men had many insightful suggestions, particularly for some of the ensemble sections of the script – transcriptions of discussions about jail, college, and masculinity.

Other changes were also needed: I realized that I had underestimated the literacy skills of the inmates – I knew that each of the men had earned his G.E.D. and incorrectly assumed that they would all be strong readers. While this was true for Robert and Tim, it was not so for Eric. I felt foolish when I realized my mistake. As I listened to Eric stumble through his opening monologue (he was playing Hampden-Sydney student, Evan) I decided to punt and suggested that we switch gears and have the original “author” of each monologue read his own words so that the man who’d later portray him

could hear the selection in the author's voice. Greg responded to the read-through in his blog:

This past Tuesday's journey to the jail was very interesting! First, receiving the script was very exciting. [We were able] to learn a little more about everyone and see exactly how the show was going to be performed. I think it was amazing to see how all our different stories really connect together I have to say that it was difficult at first to listen to Eric read the script. I felt really bad that the majority of us were just whipping through words and he was getting caught up on every other word. It was then that I could see the lack of education that politicians are talking about in America. I went to a private school where you would have to transfer if you couldn't read properly by like second grade. It was very interesting to see this grown man, older than me by probably like ten years, have difficulty reading simple words. . . . I think of all the great stories, minds, and compassion behind [the script]. The jail has opened my eyes so much in our past visits – it seems like every time I am dispelling stereotyped beliefs and finding the good in “the bad.”

Our performance piece, *Committed*, takes the form of a theatrical collage – monologues and scenes move back and forth in time, voices overlap, and stories are sometimes interwoven with another to point up both the differences and the often striking similarities among the men's experiences.²⁰ In one scene, for example, two men discuss the satisfaction they derive from hard work, one as a brick layer and another as an

Emergency Medical Technician. In another scene, the men discuss what it's like to spend the majority of their time in an all-male setting, apart from the company of women. Stories of "bad boy" experiences as young teens focus on the short-lived thrill of getting into trouble and the often serious consequences of those actions. Other monologues describe significant childhood experiences, including one man's story of spending time canning vegetables with a beloved grandmother. Another man speaks about learning the importance of honor and loyalty from watching countless samurai movies, while another discusses the discipline gained from participating in gymnastics competitions across the region. The men also discuss their aspirations for the future – for some, a life in the theater, for others, opening a business, providing for a family, owning a home, or teaching literature.

"Walking in Another Man's Shoes": The Rehearsal Process

With a workable text, we launched into rehearsal with enthusiasm. The men met as a group once a week at the jail and, more often, in individual coaching sessions with me both at the jail and at the college. The process had its inevitable challenges, as any rehearsal process does, but, on the whole, the actors maintained their commitment to the project – running lines together, assisting in gathering props, writing up their biographies for the program, and suggesting further edits to the script, all the while making slow but steady progress.

I modeled my directing approach on Stucky's Everyday Life Performance and Anna Deavere Smith's character development techniques, both of which I discuss at length in Chapter Two. Stucky's conversational approach, whereby the actor tries to

emulate the character's speech, breathing, and mannerisms in exacting detail, worked well for Chase, a student, in his portrayal of Robert, his inmate acting partner. Chase did an excellent job in uncovering the nuances of Robert's character, portraying him with strength and dignity, and capturing his physical and vocal performance so well that his performance evoked in me the feeling that he was "dreaming, dancing, breathing with another. . . performing an *other*" (Stucky 139). When I asked Chase to describe embodying Robert on stage, he had this to say:

Because none of us were extremely vocal about our pasts outside of the transcribed texts, my "becoming" Robert allowed me to see a piece of him he didn't allow on a regular basis. This especially allowed me to see those things which are most important to Robert and what he was waiting to get back to. By recognizing the hardships that Robert has been through, I was able to relate to him in a way that was exclusive to experiences we share in many ways, such as brick-laying, loss, and also because he reminded me greatly of my cousin Justin. By saying Robert's words on-stage I was able to see the impact that his experience has had not only on him but what his experience can make others realize.

While Stucky and Smith's character development approaches proved effective for Chase, the other Hampden-Sydney actors, and for Robert in evoking their characters, inmate actors Eric and Tim had less success. They both struggled with memorization, and, as such, were not as successful in portraying their characters. In talking with Eric and Tim, I discovered two possible causes of this – first, both of the men they were

portraying, students Evan and Josh, used numerous verbal fillers and often repeated phrases in their everyday speech – these filler words were included in the text and clouded the content so much that Eric and Tim had trouble finding the main ideas of each monologue. Second, Eric explained that he initially had a hard time relating to what Evan talked about. While I was hesitant to edit the monologues, I quickly realized that we had to cut our losses – it seemed better to reduce the verbal fillers and “clean up” the monologues so that Eric and Tim could feel successful in their first-ever acting experiences.

For example, below is the transcription of a portion of my interview with Evan, the Hampden-Sydney student that Eric was to portray:

But, so my mom’s got issues of her own, but she works so hard, and that obviously has a huge impact on me because of her – when I’m just like sitting down doing nothing, like right now just sitting here talking, I know like *right now* my mom is working her ass off, probably talking on like three different phones – she might pop a blood vessel in her head she works so hard. Just the motivation that she has to do all that, and, you know, we live in a really nice neighborhood, and my mom may not get to enjoy the nice house we’re in all that much, but the fact remains that she’s so motivated and works so hard that she was able to get that house for herself and provide this [education] for me.

In Eric’s performance of Evan, the monologue was significantly different. With Evan’s blessing, I worked with Eric to edit it, cutting out filler words and leaving only

what Eric felt were the critical passages. Eric paraphrased the condensed version we created together and performed the paraphrase differently each time, presenting it something like this:

My mom's got issues of her own. Like, right now, she's probably working her ass off, talking on three different phone lines and about ready to pop a blood vessel she works so hard!

Over time Eric began to make some connections to his character, and, even though he did not portray Evan with exacting accuracy, he was able to attest to the power of embodiment as a way of learning about Evan. When I asked him if he felt that he could relate to Evan better having embodied him in performance, he responded:

A little bit. Being, that, you know, uh, the way the script was, with him, he done went through some things with his mom, his father, the divorce. So, to me, it was like he had a pretty rough childhood coming up. So it was sorta kinda confusing, in a way, you know. It seemed like to me he respected his mom cause she was a hard working woman, but he also don't respect her cause she wasn't always there for him, you know, to help him through certain things, so I learned that from performing him. So that was touching, knowing that he done went through that, you know. And he still, he's in college, you know, he's doin' good so far, you know.

Stucky examines the potential of deep embodiment as an analytical tool, claiming that when we truly embody another we reap rewards that are different from those reaped by performers in traditional theater. While Stucky acknowledges that an actor's use of

the ELP technique can make for good theater, that aspect of it is “surpassed by its power as a pedagogical tool for investigating self and other through deep embodiment. Deep embodiment is at once critical scholarship and empathy” (140). How so? For one thing, Stucky suggests that stereotyping the “other” is virtually impossible in ELP, as the technique itself demands a particularizing of the person being portrayed. Because the actor is performing a particular person in conversation at a particular moment and within a particular context, any pointing toward various categories of difference simply does not work and is unnecessary. The prior performance (of the original speaker) actually happened in a particular manner – a fact that makes stereotyping and essentializing impossible.

In *Committed*, the students who portrayed Eric and Tim could not rely on a stereotype of “this is how a black person acts or talks” – immediately apparent, anyway, once the students met Tim and Eric, whose speaking and movement styles are very different from each other. Evan Nasteff, the Hampden-Sydney College man who portrayed Eric had perhaps the most challenging role. Evan, a tall, lanky, athletic, white, prep-school graduate from Richmond, Virginia – and a fine actor – took on the challenge of performing an African American man at least ten years his senior, with a distinct southside Virginia dialect, a man who outweighed Evan by about 100 pounds. Evan noted that he felt a responsibility to present Eric in a positive light, playing up Eric’s optimism in the face of disappointment, his compassion for his ailing grandmother, his sense of humor, and his intelligence. By closely observing Eric over the course of the rehearsal period, Evan was able to incorporate movement and gestures to suggest Eric’s

physical characteristics as well as mimic Eric's vocal quality, tone, and the nuances of his dialect. When I interviewed Eric a couple of weeks after the performance, he had this to say about watching Evan's performance:

CD: Let's talk about Eric as portrayed by Evan.

EC: He done a good job. I thought he did a helluva job.

CD: You were often laughing when Evan was portraying you.

EC: Yeah.

CD: How come?

EC: Cause he was . . . he was . . . far as playing a black guy, he a white guy, so he do it like I would be saying it. He done that real well, so I enjoyed him . . . Yeah, he done real good with that, as far-as-wise his emotions – as with the parts that I was talking about what had happened with my grandmother and everything, so that was real good.

CD: He was sensitive in that?

EC: Yeah, he was very sensitive about that.

CD: Evan said to me at some point, in terms of his being white and your being black that he knew that he couldn't totally "get" your character.

EC: Yeah . . .

CD: He wanted to . . .

(BOTH) get a feel of it.

EC: He did! He got that. And some of my friends that know me, that was there [at the performance], you know what I'm saying, was like . . . I had some cousins of mine . . . some of my friends knew that he was talking about me, you know what I'm saying . . .

CD: That's good, so they figured it out?

EC: Yeah. Ninety percent of the people that went there, they knew that he was doing me.

CD: When Evan was playing you and said some of the things you said in your interview with me a couple of months before – about your grandmother being sick – how did it make you feel?

EC: Every time he would repeat that it would still – I could feel the same emotions that it was when I told it. That's why it, it, kinda uh, I don't know what the word is for it, took . . . overwhelmed me . . . sad, 'cause I was like, it was *me*. So when he was saying it, I was already feeling it as he was saying it, so it was kind of crazy.

In this instance, the power of the Evan's embodiment allowed Eric to reconnect to his own earlier experience, much like Joan Didion did when she watched Vanessa Redgrave portray her on stage. Interestingly, when I asked Evan if he came to a new understanding about Eric through embodying him on stage, he was somewhat equivocal, remarking that his own focus was on acting *technique*. Evan indicated that it was the time we spent together during the three month collaboration that really allowed him to see that Eric was "a great guy." For Evan, then, I surmise that the ELP technique did allow him to

perform the role convincingly, but did not compel him to accomplish the further pedagogical goal of “investigating self and other through deep embodiment” (Stucky 140), or, to put it another way, the goal of “[l]earning about the other by being the other” (Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* xxvii).

Other students and inmates echoed Evan’s sentiment, leading me to believe that perhaps the “knowing” that comes from performance comes not only *in* performance but through the collaboration in rehearsal. As Tim, an inmate actor, explained, “Like I said, I didn’t really know Rob[ert], but when we started coming together with this play thing, that’s when I really started to know Rob.” Greg, too, wrote in his final blog:

It is one thing to work with these men, another to put yourself on the same level with them. I think that is the main point as to what I have gained out of this experience. I have learned a lot in my service work at the rescue squad, fire department, Habitat for Humanity, etc., but nothing like this. It has been the constant hanging out and the deep and light-hearted conversations that have allowed me to place myself on the same level as these men. I have gotten to know each one of them personally. . . . For once, I have seen them as helping me out as well. Robert’s encouraging words, Eric’s optimistic attitude toward life, and Tim’s curiosity toward the world have opened *my* eyes.

Chase expressed a similar sentiment:

By getting to know each other we dispelled a lot of the stereotypes and misnomers that we each probably thought about one another no matter

how little we admit it. . . . It's kind of interesting to think that this play brought us all together. The memories we have of making this are what have brought us together in a way that we were able to show truthfully and genuinely to those willing to listen. With every practice and every dropped line, and shared meal, and joke, and story, we all took steps closer to each other. At the end of the day we all met in the middle and it worked.

Taking Stage: Performing Committed

After a six week rehearsal period, during which time we met as a group and I worked with each actor individually once or twice per week, it was time to perform the show for the Farmville community. Although our original plan was to open the production at Piedmont Regional Jail for an audience of community members and inmates and then to perform it again on the Hampden-Sydney College campus, the conversion of the jail's multi-purpose room into housing necessitated a change of venue. While the simplest solution would have been to do two performances at the college, this solution did not seem appropriate – our intent was to reach the wider Farmville and Prince Edward County community through the performance and I felt that performing it solely at the college might discourage a diverse audience from attending.

The most disappointing aspect of losing the performance space at the jail was that other inmates would not be able to attend the play at an off-site venue. Although I pleaded with the Piedmont Regional Jail administration to reconsider, in the end they had the final say, of course, and determined that it would simply be too complicated and too much of a security risk to allow inmates to attend the show. Further, the administration

determined that if inmate performers' family and friends came to the show, they would not be allowed to speak with the inmates. This was a devastating blow to the performers, and, although we suggested meeting in a secure area, limiting the number of visitors, "wandering" the visitors, and having officers in the visitation area, the answer was still "no." Robert, who had worked exceedingly hard on the project (although he'd never acted before, he was the first performer off book and worked diligently on his characterization of Greg), took the news quite hard and decided not to invite any of his friends or family members to the show. My production log entry for that day indicates my dismay:

Other frustrating news – the security folks have decided that the inmates in the show will not be allowed to see their families after the show. The guys, of course, were disappointed in that, as I am. I imagine now that Robert will not invite his family. He had expressed to me earlier his viewpoint that he didn't want to be that close to his family and not have the opportunity to interact with them. I certainly understand that. After I relayed the information to the group [at the end of a rehearsal], Robert asked to say something. He expressed that he didn't understand how he could go off site for rehearsals and it not be a security risk but that if he saw his family it would be. Ms. Stiff [Piedmont Regional Jail Counselor and our very supportive contact person for the project] explained that it wasn't her doing and she was sorry it was that way. He kept his temper in check, but I could tell he was angry. When I told him I, too, was

frustrated, he said “it’s just another thing,” something like that, which I interpreted to mean another thing that the jail has done to take away privileges of the trusties (like removing the phone from their pod earlier on). I will hold out hope that Ms. Stiff can get the officials to reconsider. I feel really bad for the men and know that they are disappointed. Other frustrating news – other inmates cannot come to the show, either. I am certain that Eric, Tim, and Robert would be well received by other inmates and would therefore feel empowered and successful. I am disappointed, too, that some of the questions I have about this project will remain unanswered: Would our inmate actors feel some success in getting to show off for their inmate friends? How would the inmate audience members react to the ensemble sections about life in the jail and at HSC? How would other audience members react to the inmates in the audience after seeing the show? During the show?

Our “plan B” was to present the show in Farmville’s Robert R. Moton Museum, an arrangement expertly negotiated by Ms. Stiff, whose commitment to the project – and the inmate actors – was immeasurable. Through the generosity of the Museum board, we were allowed to use the auditorium for the production – the same auditorium in which Moton School student Barbara Johns had persuaded her schoolmates to join her in the now-historic 1951 Moton School Walkout, discussed above. The Building and Grounds department at Hampden-Sydney allowed us to borrow portable staging that we arranged in the center of the auditorium. We configured the space with the audience surrounding

the stage on three sides, creating an intimate environment for the production. We also borrowed the college's portable lighting system, an essential element in transforming the space into a theater. Set pieces and props were kept to a minimum, allowing the focus to remain on the actors and the text. We used several stools, black boxes, an upstage wire mesh screen on which we hung costume pieces, a small table and a few hand props in the production – a chess board, magazines, beer bottles, apron, officer's jacket, brick mason's trowel, backpack, textbooks, a letter, etc. Performers wore jeans and t-shirts in various shades of grey and blue.

In hindsight, losing the jail as a theater space proved advantageous in some ways, for performing at the Robert R. Moton Museum situated the performance within a context that added an interesting dimension to the narratives presented on stage. For the citizens of Prince Edward and surrounding counties, the Moton School stands as a reminder of a collective history, of a struggle that impacted both Blacks and Whites. When, during Virginia's "massive resistance," town officials closed the public schools rather than desegregate, not only were black students denied schooling for five years, but so were poor white students who could not afford to attend the quickly constructed (the sudden availability of funding remains a mystery) all-white, private, Prince Edward Academy. Even after fifty years, the legacy of that time remains, no doubt influencing in subtle (and not so subtle) ways the life chances and life stories of the men in our project.

The shared history of the Moton School within the Farmville community contributed to the potential of the performance for both actors and audience members. Langellier argues that personal narrative be viewed "not as a text for performance but as

a situated performance practice which must be critically examined for its text/context relations” (“Voiceless Bodies” 208). As I noted in Chapter Two, Langellier states that rather than seeing personal narrative as simply one person’s story, we should look more closely in an attempt to see the political in the personal – “the social, cultural, historical construction of difference” that personal narrative performances can illuminate (210).

Langellier also argues that not only must we consider the “social relations” in which the teller’s narrative emerges, we must consider the context in which the audience is situated for the retelling. Problematizing audience and situation allows scholars to focus on the context of the personal narrative performance, including the site of the performance, the audience’s assumed role (as witness, therapist, analyst, critic, or cultural theorist, for example), the performer, and the text.

Too, Langellier reminds us that “the audience and situation are in question in *every* performance as the conditions of performance change” (210); we must ask ourselves “what are the consequences of performing this particular story in this particular way to this particular audience in this particular situation?” (211). Because we presented the show in the Robert R. Moton Museum, with its didactic banners, historic photographs, and written texts surrounding the playing space, it was inevitable that audience members confront the historical importance of the place in African Americans’ struggles for equality in education. When Hampden-Sydney students (white men from privileged homes) presented the narratives of incarcerated men (two black men and one white man, whose narratives point up their less privileged circumstances), and inmates the narratives of students, audience members and actors could not help but grapple with

contemporary issues concerning race and class in this rural Virginia community. After our first rehearsal at the Museum, Greg wrote:

I feel that the Moton School is a great setting for a performance piece like this. It has so much history about breaking down barriers and fighting for understanding of other people. So many people have false impressions of prisoners and I hope that our piece can dispel some of these myths.

After weeks of collaboration, opening night finally arrived. We were happy to see that all the seats were filled and that the audience was comprised of people from all over the community – jail administrators and staff, employees from Hampden-Sydney College and Longwood University, students, performers’ friends and family, Moton Museum members, and other interested community members. As the lights dimmed and the actors entered the playing space, I felt a familiar rush of anticipation, a sense of relief that the performance had, in fact, come together, and a tremendous amount of pride at what the men had accomplished. I trusted that the stories of the ensemble would ring true – that the men’s testimonies and our weeks of rehearsal would empower the actors and calm their inevitable opening night jitters.

The actors, most of whom were acting in their first production ever, took the stage and rallied together. Over the past weeks they truly became an ensemble – and it showed. The men were focused, committed to their characters, and committed to their fellow actors. It was a remarkable experience for me as the director of the piece – while I knew every line of the piece and had heard them a hundred times over, the words seemed new. Like Didion, as a co-participant in the performance, I felt that I was hearing the

men's words for the first time. The audience was responsive and generous in showing their appreciation to the actors; even the college students whom I suspected were there on a bribe of "extra credit" leaned forward in their seats and listened attentively.

After the performance we invited the audience to participate in a discussion about the show, to offer their impressions and to ask questions about the work. Too, I encouraged audience members to contact me later, via email, if they wished to share their thoughts after they'd had time to think about the performance. Many people mentioned that they couldn't tell who was who – who was an inmate and who was a student. The actors were pleased by this observation, as they had hoped the show would highlight the commonalities among the participants. Other audience members were interested in the similarities between the all-male environments as presented in the ensemble pieces used as transitions between monologue scenes. Still others had questions about the process of putting the show together, about the actors' prior theater experiences, and about how the process affected the actors' perceptions about their partners from the other group.

Several people, including a jail employee, noted the connection between the two groups: "The interaction between the Piedmont Regional Jail inmates and the students of Hampden-Sydney was remarkable. It was very plain to see that they had worked together very well to compose this and the swapping of roles was unbelievably good." Similarly, another audience member mentioned the "magic" he felt when he recognized the insight that the students and inmates had about one another, namely that "those in the other group were real people . . . like the moment when we realize our teachers are real people with interests and lives." This audience member explained to me that part of his

enjoyment of the show was seeing the interplay among the actors, the support they offered one another after a botched line or misstep – and the obvious pleasure that they had performing with one another. A faculty member from Longwood University shared a similar response:

I loved the humor that emerged from the production alongside the very moving commentaries. I enjoyed watching one inmate's face, particularly, when he delivered a line that drew a laugh from the audience and then saw that pleasure reflected back to him and he looked as if he was pleased that he had brought laughter to the audience. I felt the connection at that moment . . . and I wondered how many times that person had received that positive kind of feedback before in his life.

Her comment was about Tim, performing Josh's personal narrative about a news story he read over his high school's intercom during the morning announcements. Josh attended Fuqua Academy (the former Prince Edward Academy); the story was about a 900 person orgy in China. For Josh, this was a "proud moment" in his high school career. For Tim, the reenactment of Josh's experience was a proud moment on stage, one that cracked him up each time he performed it.

Chase shared with me in an email message his parents' response to the show:

After the play my parents were asking a lot of questions about Robert's background as well as Tim and Eric's because of the impact the play had on them. In this sense I think theater has an amazing power to allow people to sit back and listen intently and really understand a

situation. Rather than being intimately involved, such as we the cast were, the audience was able to absorb the stories and experiences in a way that didn't allow for condescension or interruption and this allowed for a powerful and immediate reaction. . . . I don't think many of the audience really knew what to expect coming in and many were shocked to find a statement of understanding within this work. . . . I feel that theater, and especially the type of theater we have done, is extremely powerful because of its reality, its intimacy, and its message.

As more written responses trickled in, I realized that for some audience members, the performance had significant meaning. One woman wrote that "it was a profound experience for me," explaining that her years as a correctional officer (she now works in the Hampden-Sydney College Library) had prepared her for the inmates' perspectives, but not for the students':

The knowledge that every word in the play came from the men themselves was the kicker. That meant for me that I was not getting information that had been filtered or questioned but "this is how I feel, right or wrong" information. I left the performance feeling that I had been part of privileged information. . . . Even as I write this, I can feel the emotions generated by the experience. I know it was a mixture of the venue (she had attended the Moton School in the 1970's when it functioned as an elementary school), the characters' testimony, and their delivery . . . This

genre is an excellent vehicle for presenting cultural and life experience diversity issues to students, faculty, and people in general.

This same sentiment was shared by a woman who noted that “the documentary nature of this production adds to its significance, to its impact, and to its power.” She also offered this insight:

Because I’ve worked with and around Hampden-Sydney men, I found myself nodding along when they addressed matters of gender and class, particularly. I have had almost no interaction with inmates . . . but I found the statements that were attributable to those men to be powerful and moving. That the two collaborated on this project gives me hope that the work of the classroom can be experienced in a living, authentic place and condition – to the benefit of everyone: the Hampden-Sydney students, the Piedmont Regional Jail inmates/students, and the audience/students.

Indeed, one respondent, a Hampden-Sydney College employee, described how the experience prompted her to consider the social relations underpinning the performance:

I saw one huge parallel in that each socioeconomic background has its own set of “normal.” The perceived “normal” of the inmates is that this is a way of life for them, perhaps an accepted way of life for them. Our students’ version of normal is they leave school and begin their professional lives rather easily with more money, cars, vacations and opportunities than the average new graduate. I don’t want to imply, however, that these inmates all came from lower socioeconomic levels.

Just citing research that does show they traditionally do. . . I really hoped when I left [the play] that the students who were in the play and those that attended the performance understand just how different lives are but that doesn't necessarily make us different people. It's just we have our own set of normal.

The comments above demonstrate the potential of performance to operate as a way of knowing for audience members. Madison writes that personal narrative performances, particularly of "outsiders," allow audience members to see themselves as part of "a larger whole," providing them with new insight that may contribute to their own transformation and understanding about "how power works." As previously discussed in Chapter Two, Madison envisions a *performance of possibilities* in which audience members, energized with such knowledge, may be inspired to act for social change (italics in the original) (281-282). It is my hope that our performance has, in ways large or small, inspired our community to do the same.

I now turn to the actors' response to the performance and performance process. I could tell from their excitement during the post-show discussion with the audience that they were pleased and proud of their performance, but I was curious to see if, and if so, in what ways, the project had affected them. I found my answers a couple of weeks later in the Hampden-Sydney students' blogs and in interviews with Eric, Tim, and Robert.

Tim and Robert both shared that after the performance several officers at the jail had spoken to them for the first time. As Tim said, "They be like, 'hey actor, how you doin'?" Both he and Robert said that such acknowledgement was "a good thing." Tim

also noted that the play positively affected the audience's perceptions of inmates, an observation that pleased him:

The play gave the audience a different aspect towards how everybody be – how they look at everybody, you know. Like I said, lot of them thinking that don't nothing come out of jail toward being good, but now they see – they still got good people in jail that's willing to change their life around, you know.

Eric, too, pointed out theater's potential to challenge stereotypes:

This play shows that being that you're locked up don't mean that you're locked up for rape or murder, child porn or whatever the crime. When people see you wearing these type of clothes [indicating his jail jumpsuit], that stereotype is what they going to [see] – “you know, well, he did something, you know, real bad.” But, he might be in here for not paying child support or something ‘cause he ain't got a job. You do have people that stereotype, and they wouldn't really know [the truth] unless somebody like you put it out there [in our play]. That's like when I always thought that Hampden-Sydney was nothing but gay guys, but after meeting with [the guys in the play], I have a whole different perspective.

Greg's remarks point to the potential that performance holds not only for audience members but for amateur performers like himself:

This has been an almost surreal experience for me. We have come together as seven strangers bringing our own lives together to form a

powerful performance. I am an acting virgin. This class has taught me the importance of theater in our culture, especially the power of a performance. I will remember this project forever. I have learned so much and changed a lot of my opinions about people. I have also grown an appreciation for the theater. I can't believe it's over, but it has been the most meaningful three credit hours I have earned.

Other participants also discussed how the performance process affected them personally. Josh summed up his experience: "Now that I have seen these things, done this play, and met these people I can say there are two things I have learned for certain. The first is that I never want to go to jail, and the other is that I will, never again, judge with conceit those who had to go there." Chase reflected on the feeling of ensemble that developed and his own new knowledge:

Between all of us I know that none of us will forget "this and that" and "so, in a way, it's influenced me, I guess you could say." Overall, this class has allowed me to see that humanity exists in every situation and every place regardless of stereotypes or misconceptions; you just have to look and listen.

Robert, too, was able to step outside of the performance itself and find insight into his own situation: "Watching Chase portray me got me started thinking about my brother and what I'm going to do when I get out. It just took my mind somewhere totally different than where I was, sitting on stage." For Robert, the combination of hearing his words performed and working hard to perform the words of another proved empowering:

This play that we put together over the past three months has really proved to me that I can accomplish anything that I really put effort into. I know what I gotta do now. I still got my job when I get home. Two, three, years from now I plan on being on the way to finish paying for my own house – on the way to getting my contractor’s license – uh, that’s pretty much it. I want to own my own house and own my own business. I want to go in halves with my brother – ‘cause see he works in the same company. Probably be something with “Robert and Jonathan,” something like that, or “R and J’s” – “J and R’s,” something like that.

This is Robert’s *performance of possibilities*.

Curtain: A Few Final Thoughts

I began this foray into critical performance pedagogy wondering if it were possible to engage students and inmates in a performance project that would allow them to gain new understanding about theater of testimony, themselves, and their acting partners. I knew that, as Conquergood so eloquently expresses, the process would privilege “particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience. . . .” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 187). What I did not know, however, was that the process would affect my own pedagogy so profoundly. It has been nearly two years since we disassembled the stage, took down the lights, stacked the chairs, and said our goodbyes, and my resolve to continue this kind of work has not waned. If anything, I am more convinced than ever that it is not only in the embodiment of another that a

performer “comes to know” but it is in the day to day collaboration with – and
commitment to – those others that enlivens and enhances that knowing.

CONCLUSION

“Like emotion and affect, utopian performatives can’t be predicted; they exist as wishes, as desire crystallizing from our labor to construct a temporary public that constitutes a multiplicity of presence, hoping to be recognized, extended, and shared. A utopian performative gives us a mode of thinking and seeing; it can’t be confined in a set of stable, immobile criteria, because it relies on the magic of performance practice, on our belief in social justice and a better future, on the impact and import of a wish, and on love for human commonality despite the vagaries of difference.” (Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* 170-171)

The experience of creating *Committed* – from our first meeting in the cramped quarters of Piedmont Regional Jail, through weeks of interviews and rehearsals, to, finally, opening night – culminated in the “magic of performance” as a utopian performative. From the collective labor of a group of unlikely actors emerged a performance that created within the audience a community with a shared vision, momentarily at least, of what a better future might entail. I am privileged to have worked with these men, and have learned volumes from my communion with them, knowledge I gained outside of the academy, outside of the classroom, and without cracking open a book.

Similarly, in my discussions with Kelli Simpkins, I have come to understand the transformative potential of collaborative performance practices for subjects, for actors, and for audiences. These experiences exemplify the link between theory and practice, convincing me that, as Conquergood claims, “theory is enlivened and most rigorously tested when it hits the ground in practice. Likewise . . . artistic practice can be deepened,

complicated, and challenged in meaningful ways by engaging critical theory” (“Of Caravans”).

Throughout my research, in both scholarly investigation and case studies, I have explored the potential of collaborative theater of testimony performance to serve, as Dolan suggests above, as a unique “mode of thinking and seeing,” a means by which audience members, community members, and actors experience insights about themselves and others that more traditional forms of knowledge acquisition do not allow. Following, I offer a brief summary of my findings and a call to action for theater and performance studies scholars and practitioners.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony Performance: Implications for Audience Members

Reflecting the goal of both Brecht’s Epic Theater and the Federal Theatre Project’s Living Newspapers, contemporary theater of testimony performances urge audiences to think critically about socio-political issues addressed in the production. As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, while the means of audience engagement differs in these three forms, the ultimate aim of performance is similar: to engender public discourse about societal conditions and to motivate audience members to work for social change.

My research leads me to concur with the many scholars and practitioners I’ve referenced in this work who believe that performance possesses heuristic potential: in the contemporary theater, audiences sometimes experience moments of acute awareness that lead to new ways of seeing themselves and the world, seminal “aha” moments evoked by an actor’s masterful performance or the work of a cohesive, keenly focused ensemble.

Indeed, in the shared space of live performance, brief moments of “clarity and communion . . . spring from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future” (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 168).

In theater of testimony performance, the “historical present” offered often illuminates important and troubling social issues of our time – race relations, genocide, homophobia, class inequity, the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, the criminal justice system, post traumatic stress syndrome, hate crime, war, transgenderism, religion, poverty, and violence. Translating these issues to the stage brings with it both opportunities and challenges. I acknowledge the concerns of Bigsby, White, Pywell, and others – that the act of translating a particular moment of history into a theatrical performance alters audience members’ perceptions of the event in important ways. *Any* translation, however, whether it is an historian’s accounting in a scholarly journal, a painter’s rendition on canvas of a remembered event, or a playwright’s arrangement of testimonies, documents, and photographs, alters the original in some way.

That said, I do not share these critics’ fears that a playwright working in the theater of testimony form will so transform the historical moment that its magnitude will be diminished, as White and Bigsby suggest, or rendered “substantially different,” as Pywell attests. If anything, as I have discussed above, playwrights working in the form strive to present a multiplicity of perspectives in order to allow various truths, as opposed to one truth, to emerge; moreover, in so doing, they honor the historical moment and its participants. It is especially important to note, too, that in collaborative theater of

testimony performance, the subjects of the performance are engaged in its creation, and thus have a voice regarding how they and their experiences are represented on stage.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony Performance: Implications for Community Members

Too, I have argued throughout this work that the transformative potential of collaborative theater of testimony performance extends to the community members whose experiences are reflected in the performance piece. As noted above, in a true collaborative project, the subjects of the performance piece are involved in its development from the beginning; therefore, the opportunity for moments of insight exists in every phase of the performance process, from initial interviews between theater artists and community members to the closing night of performance, and, sometimes, beyond.

As I have discussed, it is often during these initial interviews that community members first realize that their stories matter – that their stories deserve to be told. As Simpkins related in our interviews, in sharing their testimonies, the citizens of Laramie and former Peoples Temple members were often surprised to find that the Tectonic Theater Project actors were not only willing to listen but were committed to sharing their stories in a respectful manner. Later, in performance, as community members become part of the community of audience members, they often experience profound moments of healing, of validation, of forgiveness, of acceptance. In seeing their stories on stage they may experience, as did Joan Didion, the odd sensation of “hearing [themselves] for the first time” (Didion 7). And, as the actors in *Committed* reported to me, performing in front of an engaged and generous audience reaps its own rewards – a sense of satisfaction in one’s abilities and increased self-confidence, an important gift especially for those

whose status of “inmate” brings with it a lack of agency and, oftentimes, a diminished sense of self-worth.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony Performance: Implications for Performers

As I’ve argued in the preceding chapters, collaborative theater of testimony performance also challenges actors who embody community members to address their own perspectives about and attitudes toward difference. While most actors engage in character analysis to a certain extent, and may endeavor to find a point of connection with their characters (either fictional or “real”), I argue that because the actors in a collaborative theater of testimony performance have *firsthand knowledge* of the real-life characters they portray and have developed relationships with them, their experiences differ from performers who’ve not participated in the original creation of the piece.

As Simpkins and the actors involved in *Committed* attest, embodying the role of someone you know carries with it the added pressure of honoring the subject’s story and of presenting his or her experiences as truthfully as possible with the full knowledge that the person will see your work in the performance. The actor must, as Bacon described, engage “cognitively, viscerally and emotionally” (94-95) with the subject, striving to experience the feelings of the subject so that she or he might perform the role convincingly. Such attention to this ephemeral connection – to a committed embodiment of the other – diverges from Brecht’s prescription that actors must stand apart from their characters and avoid an emotional connection of any sort.

But, as Anna Deavere Smith and so many others argue, it is in the act of becoming the other and seeing the world through the lens of that other person’s

experience that actors are compelled to question their own attitudes and perspectives. This complex process of enactment begins when the actor opens herself to the possibility of blending aspects of her own life with the lives of subjects she embodies in performance - through *felt sensing*, as Bacon would say, she comes to *know*.

Many proponents of experiential education argue that any number of service-learning projects and other forms of civic engagement can teach participants about other people and lessen the social distance among seemingly disparate groups. I agree, and have led my own students in similar projects. However, I am arguing that one's participation in collaborative theater of testimony projects allows an even *greater potential* for social change, for such projects cast a wider net: by definition, with theater productions come audience members, each a potential activist for social change.

Collaborative Theater of Testimony Performance: Implications for Scholars

In *Geographies of Learning*, Dolan encourages theater and performance studies scholars and practitioners to engage in performance projects with scholars, artists, and activists in other disciplines in academe. I support Dolan's call, for as I pointed out in the Introduction to this work, my research is relevant to a number of disciplines. Dolan envisions collaborative efforts among theater and performance studies departments with departments of cultural studies, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and critical race studies. I would expand this list to include departments of sociology, psychology, anthropology, English, and ethnography. Moreover, I argue that theater practitioners and performance studies scholars should engage their students not only with students across

disciplines in their own institutions but also with *community members* outside the university campus.

For example, imagine a collaborative theater of testimony performance of migrant workers' stories, created by migrant families and theater students at a small college in the stunningly beautiful but economically depressed region of Downeast Maine: the potential impact on student actors, audience members, and migrant workers and their families is significant. Envision the opportunities for campus and community dialogue if the performance were part of an interdisciplinary symposium examining immigration policies, workers' rights, race, class, and the region's economic development. I concur with Dolan's assertion that performance offers a space for exploration

. . . that can be filled and moved, by and to the margins, perpetually decentered as it explores various identity configurations of production and reception. University theater, in particular, has the potential to teach *spectators* how to be moved by difference, to encourage them to experience emotion not as acquiescent, but as passionate, and motivating toward social change. (italics added) (*Geographies of Learning* 84)

And, as I have argued in these pages, theater has the potential to teach and motivate *actors and community members* as well. By building alliances within and outside various academic disciplines and by venturing outside the academy to embrace community members and activists toiling in the trenches, theater and performance studies scholars and practitioners empower themselves with both the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to enact social change. Collaborative theater of testimony

performance, at its most efficacious, allows artists and community members to produce performances that illuminate and enlighten – and that seek to foster respect, understanding, and equity for all.

In sum, by engaging in interdisciplinary and/or community performance projects, not only would theater and performance studies students hone their craft, they would, through working with others in a collaborative forum and embodying those others in performance, gain an understanding of those others in a way not possible through conventional means. Admittedly, it may not be the case that engaging in collaborative theater of testimony performance – as community members, theater artists, audiences, or scholars – will change the world. But, it is most assuredly the case, as Dolan suggests in *Utopia in Performance*, that such performances perhaps “create the *condition* for action; they pave a certain kind of way, prepare people for the choices they might make in other aspects of their lives” (169 - 170).

In sum, it is our job as scholars, teachers, and theater practitioners to provide opportunities for our students, colleagues across the disciplines, community members, and audiences to engage in such dialogic performances.

And, as Dolan reminds us, it is our job as scholars and theater artists, too, to simply *go to the theater*, to open ourselves to a performance of possibilities, to invite the “aha” moments that may emerge out of the “collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing *and* the spectating take place” (Lehmann 17).

Finally, it is our job to open ourselves to the possibility of transcendence engendered in performance, so that we can draw on those transcendent moments in the other, more ordinary spaces of our lives – those spaces outside the intimate, wondrous space of the darkened theater. Perhaps the epiphanies we experience in the theater as actors, community members, or audience members will, if the theater gods allow, embolden us to create utopian moments in our daily lives and thus empower us to envision the very real possibility of social change.

Curtain

ENDNOTES

¹ While either spelling, “theatre” or “theater,” is acceptable, I have chosen to use the latter throughout my dissertation, unless I incorporate a direct quote that contains the “re” spelling. My reason for doing so is that Emily Mann, one of the foremost theater of testimony playwrights working today, uses the “er” spelling in discussing her work. For example, in an interview in *Women Who Write Plays*, Mann credits Simon, co-founder of the Market Theater of Johannesburg with “dubb[ing] the plays Theater of Testimony, because in South Africa, they come out of that tradition” (Greene 291).

² While many people identify Piscator primarily as a scenic designer whose technological inventions supported Brecht’s Epic Theatre, Maria Ley-Piscator argues that “nothing could be further from the truth”(16). In her text *The Piscator Experiment*, she explains that because Piscator did not publish his findings his contributions have been underestimated. In recapping his theatrical career as director, designer, and teacher, she argues that “Piscator’s Epic Theatre” emerged from the contributions of a team of artists in the 1920’s: “Piscator, the director; Brecht, the poet; George Grosz, Berlin’s Daumier; Walter Mehring, the pamphleteer; Ernst Toller, the playwright; and Walter Gropius, the architect” (25). Piscator’s experiments in Total Theatre at The New School, too, proved ground-breaking as his ensembles productions there demonstrated the elements of what has come to be known as Epic Theatre. Ley-Piscator’s text opens with these words from Kenneth Tynan: “Epic Theatre is a phrase which Brecht borrowed from Piscator in the Twenties and went on defining until the end of his life.” While a thorough examination of the development of Epic Theatre is beyond the scope of this dissertation, readers should be aware of the contested nature of the term and the arguments surrounding its beginnings and subsequent practice. In much of my work I refer to “Brecht’s epic theater” and reference his writings, which are plentiful, but I do so with the knowledge of Piscator’s contributions as well.

³ Dolan explains that she uses the term “performative” following Austin’s sense of the word – that is, that “as a performative, performance itself becomes a ‘doing’ . . .” (Dolan 5). The concept of speech-act theory, developed primarily by John Austin, and later, by his student John Searle, posits that speech-acts are “performatives,” that is, they not only say something, they *do* something. Austin argues in *How to Do Things with Words* that a particular type of utterance – a “performative” – performs an action. When a person says “I do,” at a wedding, for example, an action has occurred (Austin 147).

⁴ The playwright, Leigh Fondakowski, inserted an apostrophe in the title of the play to differentiate the play from the community itself, known as The Peoples Temple.

⁵ For an example of guidelines, see Patricia Ticineto Clough’s work, “Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 6(2000): 278-91; Carolyn Ellis, “Creating Criteria: An Ethnographic Short Story.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 6(2000): 273-77; and Yvonna Lincoln, “Emerging Criteria for Quality in Qualitative and Interpretive Inquiry.” *Qualitative Inquiry*. 1(1995): 275-89.

⁶ Kelli Simpkins recently played the lead role of Sy in *Fair Use* at Steppenwolf’s First Look Repertory of New Work Festival. Prior to that she was in the world premiere of *Good Boys and True* at Steppenwolf, directed by Pam McKinnon. Recent theater credits include *Execution of Justice* with About Face Theatre, directed by Gary Griffin, and *One Arm* at Steppenwolf, directed by Moisés Kaufman. Kelli

is a member of the NYC based Tectonic Theatre Project and is one of the original creators and performers of *The Laramie Project* (Off -Broadway, Denver Center, Berkeley Rep., LaJolla Playhouse). Recent projects include *The People's Temple* (dramaturg/actor), a verbatim theater piece about the survivors of the Jonestown mass murder/suicides (Berkeley Rep., Perseverance Theatre, The Guthrie) and *Casa Cushman* (dramaturg/actor), a play about the Victorian actress Charlotte Cushman in development with Tectonic and About Face (2007 TCG/NEA Grant – both projects directed by Leigh Fondakowski). She has two current projects: In September 2008 she began rehearsals for *Celebrity Row*, a world premiere by Itamar Moses at American Theater Company, directed by David Cromer and participated in the development of a new play with Rivendell Theatre called *Mercury 13*. Film and television credits include: *A League of Their Own*, *Chasing Amy*, *Law & Order: C.I.*, and HBO's *The Laramie Project* (Emmy nomination: Ensemble Writing). She is a certified teacher in Tectonic's "moment work" technique.

⁷ Simpkins is referring to Greg Pierotti, Leigh Fondakowski, and Steve Wangh.

⁸ Throughout this essay, when I included participants' and audience members' comments, I do so with their permission.

⁹ Students attending Hampden-Sydney College (HSC), founded in 1775, are enrolled in one of only three all-male colleges in the United States. Many students who come to HSC elect to do so because of its isolated nature. HSC's *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)* scores show that our students engage in serious conversations with those whose racial, ethnic, and social background is different from their own far less frequently than do students at other liberal arts colleges. Many do not see the importance of engaging in these interactions at all. Additionally, the *NSSE* survey suggested that many of the HSC students saw the college as not providing them with opportunities to have these interactions. While there is some (and ever increasing) diversity represented in our student body, the vast majority of our students are Southerners from middle and upper-middle class white families. At the start of the 2006-2007 academic year, African Americans comprised 5.2% of the student body and whites comprised 91.5% (HSC Office of Institutional Research, "2006 Enrollment"). Data compiled from the *Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP)* Freshman Survey provides further insight into the demographics of the student body. The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, oversees the *CIRP*; the Freshman Survey form contains information about students' demographics, academic and extra-curricular activities, opinions, future plans, and motivations for attending college. Twenty-two percent of entering students in 2002 came from families whose total income was \$100,000 to \$149,000, with 13% between \$150,000 and \$199,999, and 16% at \$200,000 or more. As compared to men from other four-year private colleges, a higher proportion of HSC men surveyed were interested in politics, planned to participate in student governance, planned to attend law school, considered it important to be well off financially, intended to become a community leader, and sought to become successful in a self-owned business. There were four students in the theater project, all of whom were White and from privileged families. The group was comprised of one sophomore, one junior, and two seniors.

¹⁰ I discuss some of the material implications of what Arthur Brittan refers to as "masculinism" in my article "The View from the Top: (Re)envisioning How Men of Privilege View Gender and Sexuality." Exemplified by what he describes as a "masculine ideology," masculinism mandates that men perform the dominant role in both public and private spheres; it further holds that women and men are fundamentally different, hence sanctioning traditional sexual divisions of labor. In my essay I argue, based on data gathered from students enrolled in my Social Constructions of Difference course, that many of our students hold these traditional views of masculinity, beliefs that, in many cases, contribute to sexism and homophobia among some members of the student body. I also look to the work of Michael Kimmel for an explanation of these traditional viewpoints in the unique homosocial environment of the all-male college – an environment where, as I demonstrate with data collected by the Office of Institutional Research at the College, along with the brotherhood of the single sex institution, homophobia and sexist attitudes coexist. I

conclude with the good news – that civic engagement in the form of service-learning has had a positive influence in my course; students, when asked to teach their community partners about the social constructions of gender and sexuality, come to question and rethink their own attitudes toward difference.

¹¹ The following is a quote from the student's *Facebook* page, as included in the Intercultural Affairs Committee report: "our disgust about the college support of a group of people with a lifestyle that we... find objectionable . . . we will never stand for the degradation of our school and students, which is why we will fight tooth and nail to preserve Hampden-Sydney's great tradition of producing good men and good citizens."

¹² On April 23, 1951, a sixteen year old African American student performed a radical act. Barbara Johns organized a student walk-out at the Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, in protest of inadequate facilities at the all-black school. When the principal left campus to see about alleged truant students at the downtown bus station (a fabrication designed to lure him away), Johns and her organizing committee of ten students called their classmates to the auditorium for an assembly. The teachers agreed not to attend. Johns persuaded her classmates that they needed to go on strike in protest of the inadequate facilities and supplies at the school. The principal returned and asked the students to reconsider but they refused. The students then marched to the courthouse in this southern, segregated town. When conditions did not improve at the school, Johns called Oliver Hill, a prominent African American Richmond attorney, to intervene. Although initially lukewarm about the idea, Barbara Johns' persistence won him over. He agreed to help, but only on one condition – they must lobby for more than a new school; they must demand desegregation. The students agreed and continued their strike until May 7, the last day of the school year. Eventually, the Prince Edward County case, known as *Davis, et al v. The County School Board of Prince Edward County* became one of five cases in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that changed the course of education in the United States. After "separate by equal" was nullified, Prince Edward County resisted integration and, in a display of "massive resistance," closed its schools for five years rather than desegregate. Repercussions of that act are still felt in the small Virginia community today. See *They Closed Their Schools* by Robert C. Smith and <www.Motonmuseum.com> for a thorough examination of the Moton School Walkout and subsequent events.

¹³ The inmates housed in the Piedmont Regional Jail, a population that fluctuates over time, come from Prince Edward and the surrounding counties (Amelia, Buckingham, Cumberland, Lunenburg, and Nottoway) and are, according to jail administrators, largely representative of the region's citizenry, although there are usually more black inmates than white. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2005 Prince Edward County's population was 62.8% white and 35.8% black. The median household income in 2005 was just under \$29,500; 18.3% of the population was identified as living below the poverty line, compared to a state percentage of 9.9%. The juxtaposition of the regional jail's diverse population with Hampden-Sydney College's largely homogeneous population provided a rich setting for our project. We worked with three inmates, two of whom identified as African American and one as White. While I do not know the inmate's exact ages, I estimate that they ranged from their early twenties to mid-thirties. We received no information about the social or economic status of the men with whom we worked, and we were told not to ask about the conditions of their incarceration. However, during our discussions and my interviews with the men, they volunteered information about their lives, including details about their childhood, adolescence, brushes with the law, prior convictions, and future aspirations; these stories comprised the performance text.

¹⁴ In *InterActions*, I share students' testimonies about their experiences at Piedmont Regional Jail, in particular their remarks about how the experience challenged them to rethink their stereotypes about inmates.

¹⁵ Several students, upon completion of the project, expressed their likelihood to engage in community service and service-learning opportunities throughout their schooling, noting that they felt such work was both a duty and a privilege, as it proved personally gratifying and enlightening. I discuss these issues in an essay in *The National Civic Review* co-written by my colleague, photographer and professor Pamela Fox.

¹⁶ In an essay in *TransFORMATIONS*, Prof. Fox and I discuss the potential of photographic self-portraiture to empower inmates, providing a method that allows them to construct the identity they chose to share with the outside world. Examples of the inmates' self-portraits are included in the essay.

¹⁷ Because I was not the professor of the course, I was not burdened with assigning grades, a fact that I believe encouraged the students to be more open in their interactions with me and in the blogs they wrote each week. I endeavored to nurture a collaborative, positive, spontaneous, and somewhat informal relationship with the participants, my preferred way of working in creative pursuits. The ability to adjust quickly and with good humor to the vicissitudes of jail life proved essential – it was often necessary to move from Plan A to Plans B, C, and D within one rehearsal period.

¹⁸ In his text, Boal explains that it was his goal, in working with citizens in Peru, to “show in practice how the theater can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts” (121).

¹⁹ Because the actors and I were on a first name basis for the three months of our project, I am using the men's first names throughout the chapter.

²⁰ See the Appendix for the performance script and a digital recording of *Committed*. These materials are included with the kind permission of the *Committed* ensemble members.

APPENDIX

Committed

A Collaborative Theatre of Testimony Project Created
by Men at Hampden-Sydney College and Piedmont Regional Jail

Performances:

December 5 and 6, 2006

Robert R. Moton Museum, Farmville, VA

Directed by Claire E. Deal

The Performance Script is derived from interviews with ensemble members:

Eric Cheatham

Robert Davis

Joshua Jarrett

Greg Mascavage

Evan Nasteff

Tim White

Chase Young

Interviewer and Script Editor

Claire Deal

Time: Then and Now

Place: In and around Farmville, Virginia

Cast:

Actor	Character
Eric Cheatham	Ensemble #3, Evan
Robert Davis	Ensemble #1, Greg, Dude 3
Joshua Jarrett	Ensemble #7, Tim, Dude 1
Greg Mascavage	Ensemble #5, Chase
Evan Nasteff	Ensemble #4, Eric
Tim White	Ensemble #2, Josh, Dude 2
Chase Young	Ensemble #6, Robert
Director's Notes	

The Hampden-Sydney men performing in *Committed* are enrolled in Professor Shirley Kagan's "Topics in Theatre" class. This semester the course is dedicated to the study of the growing field of documentary theatre, a field which seeks to explore the real experiences of people from many walks of life in many situations. The results of this study as well as many hours of enjoyable, funny and sometimes painful collaboration are before you today in the form of *Committed*.

Our collaboration with our partners at Piedmont Regional Jail was informed by documentary theatre sources such as Emily Mann's play *Execution of Justice* about the murder of San Francisco Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Milk; Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* about the causes and consequences of the L.A. riots; the Innocents Project, which seeks, through its work and its touring play, *The Exonerated* to examine the fate of those wrongfully placed on death row; and the work of Augusto Boal, an influential Brazilian theorist and practitioner who pioneered the revolutionary techniques of forum and legislative theatre in which those segments of the population traditionally unheard and unempowered are given voices.

The voices you hear on stage this evening are our voices – our stories told in our own words. We've learned much from telling our stories to one another – perhaps even more from listening closely. We are honored to share our stories with you and commit them to you for safe keeping. Enjoy.

COMMITTED

Ensemble 1: Opening

- #1 (reading from HSC etiquette book, as others do in the following sequence) “*Introductions*: When you are with another person, always introduce that person to friends and acquaintances you meet, on campus or anywhere else.
- #2 The theory is that you introduce the less well known or less important person (“A”) TO the better known or the more important (“B”), by way of honor to the latter.
- #3 Thus the proper form is to introduce a man TO a woman, or when you have two of a kind, to introduce the younger or the less distinguished TO the older or more distinguished, if the distinction is discernible.
- #4 A woman is never introduced TO a man unless he is a clergyman, the President, a governor, a mayor, or a foreign head of state.
- #5 Remember as the basic rule that the woman or the older and more distinguished person (“B”) is the one TO WHOM the introduction is made.
- #6 So you introduce a male friend TO a professor, dean, or your father; but these same men you would introduce TO a female friend.
- #7 And you introduce her TO your mother.”

(all look dumbfounded at one another)

- All We’re screwed/you’re kidding me/ I think we’re in big trouble/ etc.
- #3 Uh, here we are – and there you are. Pleased to meet you.
- #6 Some of us temporarily hang out at Hampden-Sydney, that all-male liberal arts college on the hill, heading down 15 south.
- #1 And some of us hang out at Piedmont Regional Jail, in all-male pods – housing units – heading up 15 north.

- #2 Tell the people the rest of the story.
- #1 Oh, we're inmates there – you know, hardened criminals, bad guys, the people your parents warned you about.
- #6 You all watch TV and movies, right? – you know, then, that the typical male criminal is just really mean, not any fun to be around, dangerous, any combination of that.
- #3 Yeh, you do have some criminals that you just really don't want to come in contact with – and you have some that come in just for drivin' – for drinkin' and drivin' and just drivin'.
- #5 Usually male criminals are always displayed like they're a bunch of violent criminals, not like, say, some guys who are in for a couple of months or something.
- #6 Right, just generally, the media puts some kind of violence on it – that makes for good media, obviously.
- #1 Everybody thinks that everybody in here done the exact same crime or something – like it's all one category, but it's not.
- #6 The same kind of thing happens at HSC. People think that there's just one "Hampden-Sydney man" but that's not the case.
- #5 Yeh, some of the more prevalent stereotypes include . . .
- #1 Rich boys.
- #6 Anyone that knows of Hampden-Sydney, there's definitely the stereotype of the upper class, white, rich, polo sport, kinda guy you know, like very yacht club, country club guy.
- #2 Preppy.
- #4 Even my friends at home – in Richmond – they really think I went off to college and became this like really, like stuck up, preppy, boat shoes-wearing, like doesn't give a damn about what anybody else thinks.

- #6 And there's also the stereotype of the avid hunter and uh, the conservative, that's a good one too. Definitely there's a nice chunk of students that do apply to that.
- #3 I'm goin' tell you the truth – I heard some rumors there's a lotta gay guys – that's what I heard – that's why I asked you earlier did they bring the females on campus.
- #5 You don't see like flocks of girls during the week, but on the weekends you do. Like big weekends, you do.
- #6 Yeh, the obvious first one that everybody comes to that it's an all guy school so therefore it's an all gay school. That's always the uh, initial response to uh "Hampden-Sydney what's that?" "Yeah, it's an all guy school." "It's an all gay school?" "No, no."
- #5 I had a teacher in high school who said that Hampden-Sydney guys "kinda keep to themselves." So I guess they might think of it as some kind of stuffiness you know like a gentlemen's club of sorts.
- #6 (demonstrating a typical conversation) "Hampden-Sydney, it's an all gay school"??...what? "An, an, all guy school, sorry did I say gay again Chase, I'm sorry" But—
- #7 In the town, the respected people in the town, they view Hampden-Sydney, they all hold it in very high regard out there I think. Umm, but students in high school, both at Fuqua where I went and at Prince Edward umm they kinda, (laugh) they kinda look at Hampden Sydney as kind of a place where, you know, where the preps go and all the daddy's boys kinda go and stuff like that.
- #4 Yeh, there're some gay guys that go to Hampden-Sydney, but they're, like – but if there are they usually keep it to themselves. Because if you think about it, like, like Hampden-Sydney is like mostly white, and they're all like, really, really conservative, and so that would be like such a hard environment to come out in, you know. And, so, like, usually they keep it to themselves.
- #3 They got 'em here, too, yeh, they come out the woodwork. That's their thing, that's what they do. I don't knock em, that's their thing, you stay in your area, I stay in mind. You 'bout can tell – it goin' come out sooner or later. I respect the ones that do tell me, I can get along with that. But the undercover ones....

#7 Well, since my friends and I are all from around Farmville and we know how Hampden- Sydney's like we didn't think it was a gay school or anything – we just thought it was a place where people go in good guys and come out assholes.

All (general laughter)

(Fade – move into positions for Scene 1)

Scene 1: Early Influences

Eric

I stayed with my mother for a while after my father's death and then I moved to my grandmother's. I was her little favorite. She spoiled me, pretty much so, but she worked me, too, cause at that age we used to go pickin' blackberries, and peaches, and at this time of year right now we'd be harvestin'. My grandmother loved to can a lot, so always, first thing in the mornin' I'd go with her to pick berries or any type of vegetables – plums, grapes – all that. This was right here, right here in Keysville, Virginia.

She's always making jellies – she do a lot of canning. She always say "stock up because you never know – the winter comin'." She one of those type people want to be ready in case any type thing happens. She keeps like three or four freezers full of everything – different stuff – cans, jars. We fussin' with her now cause she just done packed up so much stuff that no food gonna be in the stores!

She's like that – ever since I was small we'd been doing that – the whole family. We harvest corn, pears. My favorite is pear preserves, so I make sure I be with her on that day. I always get me a case of it to carry home.

Greg

I grew up Catholic – Roman Catholic –so I definitely learned about living by the Ten Commandments, loving each other – you know? – Christians – but just doing the right thing always no matter how hard it is. And you know? – That was one of the reasons why I came to Hampden Sydney because I knew that was going to be hard – you know living by such a strict honor code – but you know that is what is needed in life. – It is especially needed in business. You know?

My dad is a very successful business man and he has shown me no matter – umm – where the corporate world will take you – you will always have to be centered around your morals – you know? – and keeping a level head. He warned me about letting money and greed come into your life. And going to Hampden-Sydney I could follow that path, I could go into some bad routes or the greedy route and you know just worry more about making more money than about true happiness .

When I think about what I want to do with my life it boggles my mind. I know that I want to do something with business and something that involves healthcare and new technology but as far as the route I want to go . . .

Just figuring it out, it is one of the mysteries of life. I know I want to end up in Charlotte and get a good job that can support my family. You know also get my kids through college without them having to worry about that. Loans and stuff. That is the main goal my Dad set, he grew up in poverty, and he just always said that he wanted to pay for his kids' tuition and be able to give them what they need to accomplish their goals in life.

Chase

I got two totally different perspectives on what it means on the idea of being a man – from my Dad and my Dad's best friend, Gary, who we call "Uncle Gary," my Dad's friend since high school who's been coming around ever since I was a kid.

Like, my Dad's a very stout manly man, you could see him choppin down trees or something, and uh he's always had a beard, uhh he can be very intimidating if he wants to be, but he's also a very gentle person. Gary on the other hand, was always very open with his emotions where my Dad never really has been.

My Dad was always shy as far as—even as an adult he was shy – he was a social person but he wouldn't go out of his way to really interact with everyone, whereas Gary would be in the center of attention. So I got two different perspectives, but it was very nice to find like a middle ground where I wanted to see myself in there.

Josh

When I was young I used to watch the Star Wars movies at least a hundred times. I know every word from each of the three movies. You wouldn't

even have to give me a script and I could play one of the parts and never drop a line.

Star Wars kinda started this kinda phase of my life which led me to watch a bunch of samurai movies, samurai games and all that, and, uhh, their notions of honor, loyalty, respect, and all that I, kinda hit me here, (touches heart) (laugh) and, umm, I just kinda, ya know, I think that's the right way to go around things, ya know, without being deceitful and manipulative and being open, and doing the right thing. I think that's, ya know, kind of how you live your life. That's just me. (Chuckle)

Evan

When I was little, I guess I can say this because it doesn't affect me now—I had a bed-wetting problem... (laughs) And um, one of the first times I remember it happening was at my dad's house . . .

I blatantly tried to lie about it, cover it up, and my dad, I mean, he's a really smart guy, and he could smell it a mile away when he woke up (laughs). I tried to lie about it, cover it up, didn't really happen, he really really chastised me really hard, and he was really angry, forceful with me—for lying, not for wetting the bed, he couldn't care less about that, because obviously I don't do it anymore (laughs).

But he was really angry with me that first time I can ever remember lying to him, and I, you know, I burst into tears because I just couldn't understand what I had done wrong, why it was such a big deal, and I was obviously embarrassed about, what was happening, and, so, he was a big influence, like, right from the start, because he taught what it means to be a man and be honest and how you should never lie about anything. He showed me that, yeah, it's better to fess up for what you did, even if it's potentially embarrassing, because if you lie about it and it gets found out, everybody's going to know about it anyways.

Greg

My dad's really not that type of guy to sit down and have a heartfelt conversation with you. Which is very different from me. I was always waiting for the birds and the bees talk from him and you know a real heart-to-heart talk and I have yet to get it. However, he sent me a letter my freshman year that was like, it showed up in this sealed and confidential envelope. And it was just a real heartfelt letter that he wrote about, you know, follow your religion and don't let anything slip away because

you're in college and there is outside pressures so you know – that was the first heart felt, you know, letter. . . He always has shown up to my athletic events and been there for me when I needed him but that was the first real outreach by him. It was typed, it was signed in the end, but typed. It was bullet-pointed. He is just a very conservative man.

Josh

If you ask me now who I would look up to as kind of a role model...this may be your garden variety Hampden-Sydney answer, but I wanna say Robert E. Lee.

I admire Lee because he, even though he kinda led, even though he led the forces that lost and he led the forces that are, ya know, sometimes demonized by history, he wouldn't betray his state, ya know – the people he knew, he trusted, and I admire that about him. And I admire that when the war was over he made sure that no matter what, it was actually over. He didn't let it disintegrate into something like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I admire that he was able to lead, did everything he could, was loyal, and he just made sure that, that, when the situation should have been ended he ended it without it becoming a worse situation, ya know. Without it becoming something that could still be going on today, and, uhh, and I just admire him for that kind of whatever it is.

Robert

Me and my younger brother was together 24/7 as kids. (laughs) – We'd always get in an argument over playing – we were playing baseball or football or something – and I'd throw the ball too hard or something and he couldn't catch it and we'd always get in an argument over that or something – so it'd be my fault (laughs). We'd always fight, (laughs) go swimming, this and that.

We grew up in a newer model double wide we was living in when I was younger. Actually, my brother's living in it now, him and his wife – well, soon to be wife and their kid – it's on 4 or 5 acres. I had my own room, he had his.

We made little paths through the woods for our bicycles, took our b-b guns out and shoot squirrels or whatever. Go fishin' down the road at a

creek – there’s a bridge down the road below our house, I’d say about a mile, we’d walk in there and fish and do whatever else.

I loved it – I guess because it was – we was calling it, it was our area, you know. Not like if you was in the city or something you can’t say that’s your area, you know, but yeh, on that road, we knew everybody on the road, so . . . Some of our neighbors didn’t have kids – well, I mean they got kids but they older, so . . . and they was always telling us to come in and eat, or whatever.

I loved it – it was *our* area.

Chase

My Grandmother and my Mother were always extremely adamant about me being a gentleman as far as opening doors and pulling out chairs and stuff, which I remember doing a long time ago. It was [laughs] it was always a good thing, so it was never like, like “Oh no, don’t open the door for me” or anything. As long as it was that way, it was always like okay people appreciate this and “Yes sir, and no ma’m”, and always the uh southern gentleman thing, and uh, Grandmother and Mother were extremely adamant about it, uh politeness and manners was a huge thing.

Eric

My grandmother, my mother, my wife – they all mad with me right now. I don’t know – that’s why it’s hard. But my grandmother, she’s really about the only one, really, that I’m concentrating on right now, cause she raised me.

And she’s very sick right now so, and it’s kind of messing with me a little bit right now cause, um, (getting choked up). I called home the other day and they say she ain’t got to the point now, she’s big and they have to move her, you know, so that’s why I used to be there to move her all the time so she always wanted me for her to do that – and now I’m here, so (pauses, wipes tears) that took me for a loop right there (wipes tears, pauses)

But, life goes on. I talk to her on the phone. She, uh, she’s upset with me cause this is my second time doing this – eluding the police. I don’t know what it is – they turn the lights on – I just can’t stop drivin! I *know* I ain’t got no business drivin (laughs).

(Fade – Move into positions for Scene 2)

Scene 2: Kids and Teens

Tim

I was a wild, crazy child – the majority of the time I just did what I wanted to do. Like I said, I ain't look at the outcome of it – I just did it! When I was a kid, I was good with electronics. I could take stuff a-loose and put it back together, you know so, the majority of stuff I just figured around with it until I figured out how to put it back together. I'd let it sit there and eventually I'd end up goin' back and put it back together, so... People, they used to look at me like I was crazy when I used to take stuff –and, like I say, if it had a drop cord on it, a socket plug, something to it, I'd sit there and play with it.

Like I said, when I first started messing with electronics I used to get *shocked* all the time! But then, I kept trying to figure out why I always kept getting shocked when I do this, do that. So, then I started saying, “forget it – the shock ain't *nothing*” and I just kept messing with it until I figured out why it was doin' it. And, then now I can open up *anything* and don't get shocked, whatever. I'm going to fix it, so . . .

Chase

I did gymnastics for about ten years – since I was like five – and and so uh, it was pretty much like a huge chunk of my life for pretty much the youngest part of me growin up. I guess we were practicing like three—three or four times a week for three hours. There's a lot of pressure when you get up there by yourself and I find that I don't, that I can never remember going through a whole routine in a tournament. I just don't recall ever really, I remember like, jumping, and doing your mount and starting and then finishing, and that's about it, and uh, I don't know.

Apparently my coach could tell I was in the zone [laughs]. My tongue would kinda hang out, my mouth would be a little slack-jawed and uh so he always got on me about that, cause you can't even hear, even like, even when you finish you don't, you might hear people applauding and stuff, but during the whole thing you hear nothing.

I don't ever recall hearing like anybody else, cause it's like so much going on, that there's applause going on all the time, pictures and everything, and uh you're just so focused on doing every little bit right that not only do you go past that, you just don't hear anything, you just totally focus on

exactly what you're doing and so much so that afterwards you don't even realize everything that you're done and then you like wait for the score and you're sitting there looking at everything, saying "I could've screwed up here but I don't really know". Yeah, it's an intense focus by far.

Robert

Jonathan makes me real proud – 'cause he's got a good head on his shoulders, you know – he ain't – he's not but 18 and he's not – he ain't never been in no trouble. And, uh, he gotta baby now. He's paying all the bills for the house, car insurance, whatever, buying food for the house, this and that, so.

And, for somebody who's eighteen you expect them – even with a kid! – you expect them to be going out an partying their asses off, really. He goes to work and come *home*. And that's it – he's in the bed by 8:00 'cause he's gotta get up. He works six days a week - sometimes seven. 18 years old!

When I was 18, I was (pause) - it's unbelievable some of the things I done when I was 18. I think he watched me and seen – he *saw* how I got in a whole lotta trouble when I was younger – the way I acted – and he didn't want to go down that path, I guess. In a way I've influenced him, I guess you could say.

As a kid, I was wide open – rebellious – always into something – something I shouldn't be into. I was a real troubled kid when I was little, 16, 17 years old. My mom died when I was sixteen so that was a real big thing with it. I didn't like to listen to nobody! I was always told when I was like 16 to 20, 21, "Once you turn such and such an age you goin' be locked up" and they was right, some of 'em was right but some of 'em was wrong with the age, though. Majority of them was right. Then – it didn't bother me, cause it don't matter whatever they say 'cause I'm goin' do what I'm goin' to do anyway.

But now, I look back, I look back at it and I'm locked up the way they said, you know, I'm exactly where they said I'm goin' be at. I kinda look back on it now and say, you know, they *was* right.

Tim

Everybody always said, "You need to stay out of trouble, you need to stay out of trouble, do this, do that." I just started doin' stuff, you know, and then once I see I was good at it, I kept doin it.

So, that's how I ended up bein' here, so, – well, startin' the first time – I just started doin' stuff to see if I could get away with it. And I kept doin' it until I got caught. So now, I see it ain't worth it no more. You got a rush when you first started doin' it, knowing you could get away with it. After a while, that rush just starts going out the door cause you know you can get away with it.

It's a whole lotta stuff I wanted to go to school for but, you know, like I say, I just kept getting in trouble. I was goin' do all that! . . . but, like I said, I just don't know how to stay outa trouble!

I got – I went back and got my GED, so that's a *big* thing.

Greg

I was a bad teenager. Um – there was one party I went to in high school that involved some public school kids. The public school kids and private school kids didn't really get along in Charlotte. And um, one of the girls that went to my high school was dating a public school guy and she invited him to this party and he brought some friends over and um we were just partying and stuff like that and I found out that they were starting to break some stuff in the back.

I was just like, “you guys need to get on,” and then one of them was like “what are you going to do about it?” I threw a punch at him, and I was intoxicated at the time and it not likely for me to punch someone. It was kinda like who was going to throw the first punch first. And the guy was kinda bigger than me so I figured I would get the first punch in. And then he called like 20 of his friends and they started throwing shit at the houses and breaking windows and caused a whole big ruckus. (laughing)

The cops came and picked me up. I was like “Thank God I am outta here.” Because at that point I was about to get my ass kicked. So at that point it was a good thing to be sitting in a police car. Anyway –they did not take me to the station –they drove me to my house. I had my girlfriend at the time with me and she was in tears. We were dropped off at the house and I remember staying up all night and I just remember thinking, “aww shit what is going to happen to me?”

Evan

My parents divorced when I was like 4. I grew up in Annapolis till I was 11 and then I moved to Richmond with my mom. My dad still lives in

Annapolis, so while I was growing up, I got to see him... a hell of a lot more than I do now, and so I spent a lot of time with my dad.

Josh

My parents divorced when I was kinda young. I was so young that... the doctors said it affected me, but I've never had any grudges about it. I never really paid much attention to that when I was, ya know, so young I, really, I thought it was the normal mode because I hadn't really got, uh, used to life yet. . .

Evan

I don't really get my mom, but, she's like your grade-A workaholic, but she wasn't around very much when I was growing up. I kind of had a live-in babysitter for a while, I was kind of the live-in with her because she lived really close to my school. My mom wasn't around as much as other moms, so, I would just go to this babysitter's house, this went on until like 10th grade I guess.

Josh

But uhh, I've always been, when I'm not here at school it's one week with dad, one week with mom even though I could stay with whoever I wanted to now. Or I could get an apartment. Umm, umm, but, uhh, it was always one week-one week and, ya know, I always enjoyed it that way. I thought it was fine.

Evan

But, so my mom's got issues of her own, but she works so hard, and that obviously has a huge impact on me because of her – when I'm just like sitting down doing nothing, like right now just sitting here talking, I know like *right now* my mom is working her ass off, probably talking on like three different phones – she might pop a blood vessel in her head she works so hard. Just the motivation that she has to do all that, and, you know, we live in a really nice neighborhood, and my mom may not get to enjoy the nice house we're in all that much, but the fact remains that she's so motivated and works so hard that she was able to get that house for herself and provide this [education] for me.

Josh

I went to these doctors for just a little while when I was young because I started getting really hyper so they put me on Ritalin which I think should be outlawed cause... I won't say, but, umm, yeah, I went to a therapist I think for 4 or 5 weeks, and, umm, all he really did was play board games with me and talk about my parents, and I guess it was something I didn't notice . . .

But, umm, they say I calmed down after that, and they said it was just, ya know, hyperness was just a by-product of the divorce or something. I, I really, I still don't know. I didn't really think it affected me anyway, I don't think. It might, but I don't think.

Evan

Y'know, she wasn't around as much! That's kinda why I talked about my dad first, because, I mean he works hard, but his shit was more straight in that he would work hard but when he came home he would spend time with me. I mean, I can't even talk about how much it meant to me when he would come home and be like "Hey, you want to play this videogame?" Like, I can't even express how much that meant. And so, I miss, I miss that, you know when we moved to Richmond, my dad kind of got left in the dust. I'll see him now on holidays and a week or so in the summer, but that's it.

My mom, you know, she's there, she's there for me and if I called her up right now with a really serious question, she would help me out with it, but I can't really lie, she wasn't there that much when I was growing up. So that's the downside. Going through all these changes in high school, this stuff is always happening, and, not really having anyone to talk to about it. Kind of having to figure it out with my friends. I had a lot of those conversations with aunts and uncles and with my friends' parents, so I got that kind of guidance, just not from my mom.

Definitely a downside.

Josh

I think Ritalin should be outlawed it's just a few might take offence. . . because I think if your child is hyper, you just need to slap him. I, I mean, I don't think, ya know, beat 'em. But I don't, I don't think, people, especially nowadays have this big thing about how you shouldn't hit your

child if they're acting up. I think, I really do think that if you hit 'em once or something they'll stop.

I think, ya know, it's a great motivator. My parents never really hit me, as the... they'd spank me, but, they never ya know, they never beat the crap out of me or anything, but when they did spank me or something I stopped. It made an impression.

(Fade. Move into positions for Ensemble 2)

Ensemble 2: Men 24/7

2 People think this and that goes on in jail, but, you can't really say that, 'cause you haven't put yourself in this predicament to come here, so you can't believe everything you hear about jail and this and that. Only way you can believe it is you gotta experience it for yourself to know what's really goes on here, you know.

1 I think in any jail, it's always this man's going to show this man how big of a man he is. If there's a fight, you know. This man don't want – well, I don't want no other man disrespecting me and no other man don't want me disrespecting him, so, I guess we're each trying to show each other how big of a man we are.

6 Yeh, at Hampden Sydney, too – absolutely, you know when you walk into the Commons there's always a certain amount of tension that arises with all those guys being in the same area, cause, I don't know, like a lot of people get – just like if you stare at em' too long, if you look at them – anything like that can set people off.

4 Actually two years ago it was dinner and there was an actual fight in the Commons. These two guys were saying something like "you don't know me" – or saying some stupid shit and they just went at each other. It got broken up like, really fast.

5 At our school I'd say that a lot of the tensions get broken up. I'd say that a lot of the problems that arise are broken up before they turn to something violent.

1 There's a place to do something and a place not to do something. A dumb person's going do it when it's not the time to do it, but

someone that's smarter waits to, you know, when they know they're not going to get in trouble, this or that.

- 6 I think that, in the different instance – sometimes you won't have anybody break it up but you'll have a bunch of people that rush in the opposite direction – and just try to escalate it. Which is exactly what happened last weekend.
- 1-7 (overlapping) Alcohol. Alcohol. Alcohol is the biggest problem.
- 6 A kid, basically he got in a fight with 6 fraternity brothers somehow. Six fraternity brothers jumped one person, for no good reason for what I can understand. He's gotta get surgery on his hand and his head. He's alright though, he's good.
- 2 It's not basically violence in this jail, I mean you might have a fight here and there.
- 3 You don't have to use your hands – you don't have to fight. You let that man know how you feel. They know you don't play and joke so they won't bother you. So you won't have no problem with them. Don't start it, you don't have to worry with it.
- 1 Once you start playing it's going to get worse and worse – you think you're going to be able to play with each other more, here, there, hit on each other, pluck on each other, and it becomes a problem and next thing you know you're fighting.
- 3 I think a woman tames it down a little bit. It's like a, I don't know, I can't explain it. From *my* point of view I think it just calms it down – you know what I'm saying – it's a sense of relaxation for me, you know what I'm saying? Just knowing that I have another companion, you know what I'm saying, that I can just talk to rather than a guy here. That's me, but I'm quite sure the rest of the fellas they feel the same way, you know?

(Fade – move to position for Scene 3)

Scene 3: Women

Eric

Only thing that bothers me – I like to be around a lot of women ‘cause I like to talk trash – and the women in the kitchen, I get ‘em to laugh, I talk trash, they talk trash. I enjoy that, I enjoy being around a woman – that’s just in me, in my nature, cause I grewed up around women, you know what I’m saying? Most of my family females – my aunts, cousins, all of em, we just lollygag, bullshit a lot, talk trash.

And, I miss that – that’s something I *do* miss! You know. And it gets to me sometime, cause sometimes we can be in a hall, like us guys we going back to the pod, and the females come out of the pod, they [officers] don’t want you to turn your head! Man, come on – I’m a grown man! Don’t never turn my head! They don’t want you to look at them – I still look! They like, “man, you’re crazy – Cheatham, get on in the pod.”(laughs).

See some of the women you even know, you know what I’m saying – and it’s hard when you see one cause you be like “hey” (raises his hand to wave, then jerks it back down) and they, you know, (mimics officer) “you can’t do none of that,” you know, so it’s crazy.

The women the same way, they the same way. Some of ‘em throw they hand up and say “hey, how you doin,” you know, “such and such, alright. . .” Sometimes you might get an officer who’s pretty cool and he ain’t goin’ say nothing and we still talking anyway – what you going to do – put it on my chart? Let me say what I’m going to say!: “I’m leaving such and such, call me when you come home” . . . or anything like that, you know, ‘specially if they real close to you, you know.

I’m relaxed just talkin’ to the women when I’m working in the kitchen all the time, you know what I’m saying. It’s comfortable for me to talk to them. Maybe that’s just me. . . I can’t explain it. I’m happy – I mean, that’s *me*. I love that. That’s something I love to do! I guess I don’t know . . . I’ll have to think over that thing again, too. I just remembered something my grandmother said – “The women goin’ get you, boy!” (laughs) And, that’s why I was drivin’, too! (laughs) Yeh, yeh, that just come across my mind sittin here talkin’ to you... (laughs and shakes head!) See that!

Dude 1

(looking as if he's just rolled out of bed) I can roll into class stank as shit and not really have to worry about anybody really caring. No, "Susie cream cheese" so to speak, I mean, its true man. If you're in class with girls, yeah, its nice, and you need to learn how to act in a professional environment but in a co-educational college, where you've just been partying with a girl the night before and she's sitting right across the room from you, obviously your attention might be on her rather than the professor. I don't know, it just puts your priorities out of whack. When I'm at class here all I'm thinking about is you know, one thing

Dude 2

When you're surrounded by girls all the time all your conversations usually deal with women and you start being gossipy. You start playing those little games they play, and, ya know, I uh came into this realizing that guys are way more forward when they have a problem with you and its just a different way of dealing with things, and I think its really helped me because I was really passive in high school so, ya know, it gave me an opportunity to become more aggressive and forward, and that's it.

Dude 1

I think it's made me far less conscience of my appearance on a day to day basis. I mean, I'm not gonna lie I haven't showered today. Umm I'm not gonna lie I didn't shower last night. Umm these are the same pants I've worn for four days, but, ya know, if there's no one to impress you don't have to shave every day. I find that, ya know, I don't make my bed. Ya know, I don't do things like that to keep neatly that, ya know, my parents always told me to do, and I get more stuff done because of it. I could spend 10 minutes making up my bed every morning, 15 minutes getting showered, getting ready, or I could review some notes for a test. In the end that's what I'm here to do – make grades, everything else just kinda falls into place afterwards.

Dude 3

Mixed company's a problem. Umm, I can be more honest with a group of girls than I can with a group of guys, and I can be more honest with one guy than I can with one girl. Umm, mixed company is a problem because it's usually a mix of my friends, and um I mean ya know I never really learned to deal with the... you're talking to a girl, she's interested, she's cute, a friend comes up and says some asshole comment, I mean, ya know,

that, that kinda stuff I'm still working on. I mean it's a balancing act. You do react differently to different groups of people. Um, ya know I mean you, you use different language.

Eric

I don't know why they keep us separated – I'm trying to figure that out now – I *do not know*! You know, the state of Virginia, is, to me, they try to stop, uh, what you call, this gay marriage life or whatever, you know. It seems like they would try to participate in this to keep the – it seems – (pause) you know, you got a lot of young guys that come in here, you see that's how they get *crossed over*.

Not that there's no women, but when they first come in, they be young, they not knowing that – you got other older guys that's in here who been there to certain prisons and things – that will *harm* you, you know what I'm saying?

So once they get started into this, this thing, they goin' keep on doing it - in my eyesight, I'm thinking that, you know what I'm saying, so I don't know why they won't, you know – you can't even have a conversation with a woman – they don't even want you to write a female if she's in this pod – I don't know – I don't know... that's one thing – I don't think nothin' of that right there.

(Fade. Move into positions for Ensemble 3)

Ensemble 3: R-E-S-P-E-C-T

- 5 The all-male thing? Well, if anything, you can build your character greater because you're around so many men that you see the benefits as to what certain people's personalities are and the disadvantages of other people's. You can build on that and build your character up. Expand on the greater and lessen on the worse.
- 3 My advice to new guys would be to set back and be very, uh... be very *wise* to everything that's around you.
- 2 It's plenty of 'em in here that can't adjust to it 'cause their attitude . . . and then, like I said, the majority of them they end up getting into fights, get put in the hole, or , they get moved to a pod where

they got all they friends at, so they can be around them and they don't have to change their attitude.

- 3 The reason why I said wise is you need to set back and concentrate and look at each individual person's different emotions around you before you do anything ... 'for you *say* anything . . . 'cause you don't want to come out you're afraid and end up hurtin' more or somebody disliking you cause you done said something to this one – you don't know how these people is.
- 2 The biggest man is who gets the best of who.
- 7 At Hampden-Sydney, I definitely think a lot of it's discrimination, mainly against homosexuals. I think that it hasn't been addressed as well as it could. I've heard a lot of stories about verbal arguments, and I've heard of at least one physical altercation, of one fight.
- 6 The feeling is definitely not tolerable. Last year there was a huge thing with gay bashing, you could call it. It kinda ruffles people's feathers for a minute and then the school just smoothes out the quilt and tries to let the issue go – "We'll deal with this, it's not your problem."
- 3 I seen a lot of 'em come in here and that man might be mad with that woman or somethin' -- or mad with his brother, or whatever. And you might walk up and just say, "Hey, do you know what day we're getting commissary?" and he done went off on you. While you're in here you got to be aware of everything. You don't know what goin' kick off at any given time... you don't know.
- 6 A more head-on approach would be much, much better. At least let the rest of the school know, minority or not, that this is an issue, that this is not something we're gonna keep putting behind us, this is something that you have to know is gonna happen, and if you continue to do this than this is gonna be a problem.
- 7 I think that at the very least gentlemanliness demands toleration of others, at the very least. You know, if you don't approve of, of, of a lifestyle for example you don't need to go out and hate people.
- 1 (nodding) There's the respect part.

- 5 You know, there's been problems on fraternity circle with the Minority Student Union house being down and there and its like, you know, come on, just let people have some fun and take part in the experience. You know, you do your thing and they do theirs and everything will be just fine.
- 1 Respect – I'm a big respect type of person – I don't care what you did, when you do it, or where you do it at – as long as you give me my respect I'll give it right back to you. I don't care what kind of person you are.
- 4 I mean that's the very least you can ask and I think everybody would do better to have to reach out and get to know people from different backgrounds. You know, just *learn* something about somebody else!
- 6 I think it all falls back on what you said as far as respect, though. Absolutely.

(Fade. Move into positions for Scene 4)

Scene 4: Working Men

Greg

I'm an EMT and a member of the fire department and rescue squad here. – Um – Its kinda interesting cause, you know, when all my friends are going out getting drunk on the weekends and stuff like that – you know- I go out and have a good time myself but there is always a need that if someone is getting sick or there is an emergency than you know I have to sober out and go into mode.

I have seen and dealt with many deaths – um – my first death actually was very very – sometimes I still get choked up about it because – um – it was early morning – woke up, kinda getting out of bed – Saturday morning – and we had an ALS responder call which means we hop in like this suburban that is decked out in all the advanced life support gear and we drive to a scene where there is like a less, a BLS, basic life support ambulance that needs our assistance because the call is so bad.

The young man's father was having a heart attack and you know was having CPR for about 20 minutes. And umm you know and the son could

see the heart monitor, and he knew that the heart was beating because, you know, when you're giving CPR the heart monitor is still beating. You're still pumping the blood but it's not working itself – it's because we're pumping the heart. And umm so- he was all gung ho about it or whatever and um – my boss who's a paramedic, he was running the call once we got on scene and he was like you need to go talk to the son. So, it was my first death to actually go and tell somebody, "You know your dad is not going to make it." And you know to see his son – he was about 22 – just break down and hug me right there. . . (crying)

Josh

My most proud moment EVER was, I was in high school my junior year. We, umm, tried something new that year. We had a new professor come in for Spanish, he was also a fine arts, uhh, guy, and umm he had us, he had us organize into like a little club that would do the, announcements for the morning on tape. They'd done it for a couple days and I came up and said, "hey can I do, like, world reports or something?"

And I did it, but I, umm, satirized it like Saturday Night Live or The Daily Show or something, and I kept doing that for a couple times and it was pretty fun, but one day I saw a news story that changed everything.

It was a big story about a 900 person orgy in China, and I put that on the air, and I was so proud, and it was because...for those 30 seconds that I talked about it everyone just stood up and took notice. Everyone was awake and everyone was talking about what we could have – what was acceptable in school. That was a moment I got people talking and I kinda sparked a debate among people.

I felt like I had actually done something that made a difference even though it was so random and so stupid in many ways. That, umm, made me also, ya know, really like theatre a lot more, 'cuz you can reach out to so many people just by something like that.

It was *news*, that's my argument still. I had a responsibility to report the news and sometimes the humor just writes itself.

Robert

I went to VoTech school in Russburg – I took masonry for a year – and all the other classes. That was the only reason I went to school – for the masonry classes. Other than that I wouldn't even have went to school.

I took up the masonry class – I was supposed to done it for two years but I only attended it for one year since I dropped out in 10th grade. It was something, but I didn't learn as much as I did on the job. In the class it was just like the little things – how to work the trowel and this and that. You get on jobs and it's a totally different story.

Layin' brick, I can start with nothing and end up with a house, really. Start from nothin' – from trash and end up with something that looks like, you know like a (he trails off). . .

In Lynchburg, Forrest, I can probably, every two or three miles, I can point out something I built – in Lynchburg, Forrest, that's where all the work is at. Actually, in Lynchburg on Ward's road – right across from the Wal-mart Super Center – we done a, a, Sonic – and that was on the News! It was so *hot* that summer the News actually came to the job and showed us laying brick. That was pretty cool.

Chase

At first, I didn't realize exactly what I wanted to do. I was bouncing around a couple things – psychology – the behavioral aspects of psychology – and then I was bouncing around theatre and everything, but I, finally discovered that it was my comprehension of literature and the ability to just read and understand – and really *enjoy* reading and writing – and everything finally kinda clicked.

The first book of poetry I ever read my Uncle Gary gave me, and it was a little blue book entitled “Moods of a Man” and he, uh, did all the illustration inside too. It was just a little booklet that he did in college. I guess there were probably twenty poems in there, and uh, it was the first book of poetry I ever got, and as a kid I absolutely didn't understand half of what he said in it— But I kept it with me, I still have it in my room and uh, I don't know, it just, there' something that I found rather magical about his ability to draw and his ability to write and uh just his overwhelming presence a lot of times, and uh so I don't know it just sparked an interest that I just pursued.

Evan

I want to do theatre because theatre is like moving entertainment, you know, like you can see a piece of artwork, like damn that's a really good painting and it makes me feel this way, but it can never make you feel

anything except that way, unless you come back later in a different mindset or something. Like it's always gonna look like that.

And, you know, the novel, a novel can move you a lot, if you have a really good imagination you can read and visualize what's going on, but with theatre you can come and sit in the audience and there's really no work required, you just have to keep your eyes open.

It's powerful, you know, and persistent, because if you read that play about the gay guy, Matthew Shepard, who was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming – *The Laramie Project*, if you're a person who really gets discomforted by that, you can just throw the script in the river, you know, this sucks and I don't wanna read it anymore.

But if you can get that guy to a play of *The Laramie Project*, whether it's through a friend convincing him or he's just so angry he has to come see it, I mean I guess if he wanted to he could get up and walk out of the theatre, but it's kind of more like, you came to see this, so you'll stay and watch the whole thing.

And also, it's not like an argument either. It's not like I'm sitting down with that guy talking about homosexuality and what happens, you know, he can't stand up and yell, "This sucks and here's why!" Like he has to sit silently in the audience and be quiet while our side is presented before he can leave and make his own suggestions about it.

So theatre has that power, it has the power, that, if you come and stay the whole time, you can't refute it until after the play is over.

Eric

I play chess a lot to relax. I learned to play chess, believe it or not, here – almost seven or eight years ago. I got locked up when I was about 21 and I always wanted to learn how to play chess. They always told me it was a smart man's game. I said well, I'm gonna see can I learn how to play.

After I learned, one of my cousins – he in the military –he came home and me and him started playing. And after that, I just started playing and I love it. Is it a smart man's game? I don't know – but it's easy after you just learn how to move the pieces. It came to me – just natural to me, I guess.

I love the game – it's just something I love to do. I love it so much, my wife, she bought me one for the house, and I have one I keep in my car so

if I go anywhere and somebody want to play I can. So I enjoy it that much I carry a board with me. I enjoy that – that’s something I enjoy doing. If I’m not playing chess, I’m watching a movie. If I’m not watching a movie, I be reading. If I’m not reading, I’m laying down. Or me and, me and one of my bunkies we might be sitting down on the bunk talkin’ about when we movin’ out on the street, you know what I’m saying?

And, after that, that’s it. And the rest of the time, I’m working. And that’s a big part of it – see I have a lot of people in the kitchen I work with. Got some of them who want to work, some of them don’t want to work, got some of them who ain’t know nothin’ about work! (laughs). So you got to deal with that, you know!

Tim

I gotta job when I was in Atlanta, working at, um, McDonald’s, matter of fact, at Atlanta city zoo. Met a whole lotta different people coming in there. And they, you know, they treated you different. You know how once you start hanging around different people, they treat you different – different *good*. Because the majority of people come to the zoo they, like little kids, you know what I’m saying. You talk to them and then they come back the next day.

(mimics a kid talking to him) “I was telling him yesterday . . .” you know, and then, you go on. It made me feel kind of important, cause, like I said, little kids – it’s they first time comin’ to the zoo with their parents. We sit there and talk to ‘em for a little while – then from the first day they keep coming back and they keep remembering you!

I got little cousins, you know – plus I got my own kids, you know – who look up to me – I got a little boy and a little girl. I know my little cousins, they don’t want me to be here – and my little daughter, I know she misses me. And I just had a little son in June and I can’t see him ‘cause I’m in here ... so... I gotta wait to I get out to see him! Only the thing I can tell him is not to get in trouble, but, if he get in trouble, I’m gonna be there with him, so....

I was in here when my little daughter was born – I stayed like six months after she was born, then I got out. The first time I held her I was like – I couldn’t believe it was mine! And then, after a while, her mom started bringing her over there with me and we started doing stuff. Then, I got locked up again – then, she grew up on me!

Then, when I got back, she was talkin' – all this and that – but now, I look at her and I'm like "yeh – she goin' do alright." She in school, she get A's and B's, so I don't think she goin' do bad. I call her on the phone – she tell me this, tell me that about school, this and that, so. . . I'm goin have to look out for her cause I know it's – being in the situation I do – it goin' be a hard time out there.

Robert

After I dropped out of school I said, "I'm going to get my GED so I can have it." I went and took the test – for 3 or 4 days, something like that. And they sent me the certificate – I guess it was about a month later, saying that I passed – see, I didn't know if I passed – until they sent the paper. I was happy when I got it, for sure! I hung it up on the wall.

My dad knew I was getting' my GED – see, my mom had already passed. She passed and that's when I quit – quit school – and that's when I went back and got my GED. I didn't really, I guess you could say I didn't really drop out to do *nothing* – I started work when I was 16.

To be so young – to lose my mom – it won't fun that's for sure. And like my brother, he was even younger. And, um, my daddy just passed two months ago – so I know my brother is having a rough time cause he was still in the home with my dad at the house. When he passed my brother picked up *all* the bills – everything. Crazy.

My brother's got so many people trying – willing to help him out. I got friends on the street that were like brothers pretty much. And they done told him – they all got good jobs – we all lay brick – the whole little gang I hang around with – we all lay brick. So, everybody makes good money, and they done told him, "Look, we'll help you out if you need something" – and I left like 9,000 dollars when I got locked up – and I told him that if he needed to use that then go ahead, I didn't care.

If I got out of jail tomorrow and didn't have a *dime* left in the bank I wouldn't care, but... Jon, he's the type that *he don't want no help*! Even if somebody came up to him and said "Here, here's two or three hundred dollars, pay you bills you got, that you need to get paid" "Nah, I don't want y'all's money – I got it, I'm alright, I got it."

And that's just the way – that's the type he is. I don't know. It's like my sister told me last night she'd been trying to help him but he said he don't

want no help. I guess it's the simple fact he want to say he done it all on his own.

But, uh, I'm the same way – 'cause I've had a couple of my friends – couple of ex-girlfriends I was talking to on the phone tell me since I been locked up "if you need money let me know." "I don't want y'all's money." I guess me and him's the same – we're the *same* way.

Evan

I'm not going to have kids until, either, like, until – knock on wood and God willing I make like billions of dollars as an actor – then I'll be able to start a family, 'cause I'll be able to, you know, take time out; but if I'm, you know, a starving actor, which is REALLY likely, if I'm working paycheck to paycheck, then that will play into my decision, because I'm not going to start a family until I'm in a position where I can spend a lot of time, heart to heart time.

Because I don't want to be always away, always at work, so I'm either gonna do theatre or film and fail and get a regular job and then have kids and *be there* for them or make jillions of dollars in theatre or film and then do the same thing.

Scene 6: Life after PRJ and HSC

Tim

When I get out I'm gone move to a different area so I ain't gotta worry with it. See, like I said, that's the biggest thing – I got off probation, so I ain't gotta worry with nobody else now. Like I said, I been on probation since I was like 17 or something and now I'm 26, so I got that out of the way, yeh.

I have plenty ideas about doing different stuff, you know, like I say, open my own business, you know, this and that. When I was down in Atlanta, the majority of the people down there, they open a business – they had like a car wash – that was the biggest thing down there, a car wash, cause you can get paid off that. Then you had the pressure washin' business – you go around spray houses, cars, boats, all that, you know. I could do electronics, but, I go where the money at! The quickest thing, you know ...

Chase

I find a lot of nobility, or nobleness, more or less, in the ability to teach something.

My Dad is the *only* person on his side of the family that has ever gone to college and graduated and Mom was the *first* person in her family to even attempt to go to college – she got her Associates so she did well with that. I think that part of why I want to teach is that a lot of people in my family were never interested in learning. There was always, “Soon as I can get out of school, I’m gonna go to work and get a real job, that’s how you make a living.”

I think I put more pressure on myself than my parents put on me to pursue my education as far as possible. And I think a lot of people aren’t taught that . . . that . . . how much knowledge is power or whatever cliché you want to put it but, I think that’s a huge reason I want to be a teacher.

I’ve really thought about taking some time and teaching at my old high school which is extremely diverse. I think that that would be the first step – as far as being *Mr.* Young rather than *Dr.* Young, to see if I can handle that – then college teaching wouldn’t be that big of a problem.

Robert

I know what I gotta do now. I still got my job when I get home. Two, three, years from now I plan on being on the way to finish paying for my own house – on the way to getting’ my license – a Contractor’s Aid license – uh, that’s pretty much it.

I want to own my own house and own my own business. I want to go in halves with my brother – ‘cause see he works in the same company. Probably be something with “Robert and Jonathan,” something like that, or “R and J’s” – “J and R’s,” something like that.

Greg

You know we had a call last night – a woman had slipped on the floor – you know we were putting all the gear in the back of EMS vehicle, hopped in the truck – and the woman’s mother came over and said, “Hey, guys, I just want to thank you – it’s really good to know that you guys are here.”

And it really just hits home to know, you know, that you are one of the few people out there to help people out. There is a whole community out

there – I think Prince Edward County is about 15,000, and there is only a select few of us – I think there is about 50 of us at the squad. So it's amazing to think that we serve all those people in the county. So it's amazing to think that when it's 3 am and the shit hits the fan you were the ones that they rely on.

Robert

Sometimes I look at it at the way – in a way that – cause I want him to be able to say, “Hey, yeh, that's my older brother, you know, and I love him to death” cause that's what I say about him – “Hey, that's my younger brother and I love him to death.”

But, but, sometimes I feel like that he don't want to say that because of some of the shit I've done – and he's like “I don't want nobody knowing he's my brother” – but I don't think it's like that. But, *sometimes* I think it's like that, but I don't know.

(Points to tattoo on left upper arm). “Trevor,” that's my nephew. And, “Jon-Jon,” that's my brother. Jon – Jon – his name's Jonathan, but we call him Jon –Jon. “One love” – (pause) ‘cause I'll always love him – I know he'll always be there. Cause I seen some dudes got their girlfriend's name on their arm, this and that, their wife's name on their arm, whatever, but, I'd never do that. But I know my brother will always be there – and my nephew.

Eric

Right now I'm in ‘twixt and tween’ on anything so I'm trying to hold tight on it. I just keep prayin, and my spirits is real good. I mean, I'm like “hey, you know, this is already done, so there's not no sense in me looking back thisaway, let's keep on going forward.” You know, you say you done it to yourself and it takes a lot off you.

That's the way I've figured out to be – I don't know about nobody else, but that's the way I do. You know that little conscience? That's the man up there talkin' to you – so the only thing you can do is sit right there and get yourself right and keep on going.

This is what I concentrate on—every day living right here – most of the time. The only thing that's puzzling me now is my grandmother and my wife, that's it. Other than that, I don't think about nobody else around me,

you know what I'm saying. I'm just trying to concentrate on this right now.

You're gonna face more challenges every day,

Greg

(moving downstage) You're gonna face more challenges every day,

Eric

So this right here, I look at it like this, um, It's just a little stepping stone,

Tim

(moving downstage) It's just a little stepping stone,

Eric

You know what I'm saying? It's just up to me –

Josh

(moving downstage) It's just up to me –

Chase

(moving downstage) It's just up to me –

Eric

It's not up to nobody else but me.

Robert

(moving downstage) It's not up to nobody else but me.

Eric

I leave it up to me

Evan

(moving downstage) I leave it up to me

Eric

to try to do the best I can do.

(Fade. Curtain.)

Meet the Company

Eric Cheatham was born and raised in Meherrin, Virginia. Eric is a maintenance worker and heavy equipment operator and has a certificate in concrete masonry. He is happily married with two kids, one boy and one girl. Eric currently resides in Chesterfield, Virginia.

Robert Davis is a 22 year old out of Lynchburg, Virginia. He enjoys working on cars, likes swimming and fishing in the summer, and loves spending time with friends and family. Robert plans to open his own brick laying business eventually, with six years experience under his belt.

Claire Deal is an Associate Professor of Rhetoric at Hampden-Sydney College. Claire is thrilled to have the chance to indulge her lifelong love of theatre by spending a portion of her sabbatical year working with such a “committed” group of actors and colleagues. Thanks, everyone, for your hard work!

Joshua Jarrett is a sophomore at Hampden-Sydney College majoring in history and fine arts. This is Josh’s thirteenth production as an actor, and his sixteenth overall production. This play is a very important piece for the community, and he hopes that everyone will enjoy this moving social commentary.

Gregory J. Mascavage is a junior at Hampden-Sydney College. He currently holds the office of President for the Pre-Business Society and is a Resident Advisor. Gregory also serves on the Hampden-Sydney Fire Department and Prince Edward Rescue Squad.

Evan Nasteff is a senior at H-SC. He has been on the H-SC stage many times and loves theatre. He’s never done anything like this before, though, and is very excited about it! He would like to thank Tim, Robert, and Cheatham for putting in all their work and Ms. Stiff for helping us out and being awesome in general.

Timothy White hails from Lunenburg with two kids, a girl who is 7 years old and a boy who is 6 months. A self-described “wild young man from Victoria,” Tim is a fun, loving person who can hang with anybody at any given time.

Conrade Chaston Young, otherwise known as Chase, is a senior English major at Hampden-Sydney College. Chase is from Martinsville, Virginia, and no, he doesn’t think it’s a coincidence that racecar spelled backwards is racecar.

WORKS CONSULTED

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Claire Deal, Associate Professor of Rhetoric at Hampden-Sydney College in Farmville, VA, teaches courses in public speaking, composition, and cultural studies. She serves as the director of the Ferguson Center for Public Speaking and the director of the Rhetoric Program. Professor Deal and her spouse, Beverly Rhoads, painter and Associate Professor of Art at Lynchburg College, enjoy spending time at their seaside cottage in Duck Cove, a lovely community in beautiful Downeast Maine.