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Lessons in Homemaking: Devising Theatre with Women and Men in Transitional Housing

By Chelsea Hanawalt, Nicole Kontolefa, and Esther Triggs-Camacho

Abstract

This extended abstract explores the way applied theatre and performance might be used in transitional housing settings to foster a sense of home. It includes discussions on what it means to feel at home and how power and agency affect one's experience of their living situation. The project described was completed in fulfillment of their graduate studies. Names and locations have been changed or excluded to protect the anonymity of the organization and participants.

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Our work at Faith House¹ began early in 2019. Faith House is a faith-based organization that provides transitional housing and support for men and women experiencing homelessness in New York City. Our devising workshop was the culminating project of our graduate studies at CUNY School of Professional Studies' Master's in Applied Theatre, a program that focuses on the social impact community-engaged theatre can have. Working with the men and women in their respective residences, we built two original theatre pieces in five weeks using a participant-based approach to devising theatre called "playbuilding." Playbuilding is a performative theatrical experience that uses games, improvisation, brainstorming, and other theatrical conventions (Bray 1). We aimed to share participants' stories and to celebrate their journeys through this process. We take an asset-based approach, that is, we work with a group of people, using what they know and have to offer. Since many applied theatre projects are done with populations who have little or no theatre experience, this approach is used often in applied theatre work, focusing on a population's lived experience, skills, and knowledge, rather than what participants might lack.

It was critical to work with an asset-based approach when playbuilding because our two groups had varying skills and experiences in the performing arts. Further, our participants were going through difficult times in their lives; we wanted to celebrate them and lift them up, as opposed to working from a deficit mentality. It was our job as facilitators

¹ The name of our partner organization has been changed.

to validate their ideas and creative expressions, while encouraging the group to do the same for one another.

Our goals for this project were twofold. Firstly, we aimed to celebrate our participants' resilience through story and collaborative creativity. Secondly, in a society that stigmatizes people experiencing homelessness, we hoped to create performances that looked beyond housing status.

Each session began with a snack and conversation as we waited for the group to assemble. We would warm up with a game or activity that we would play with the participants. These might be name games or get-to-know-you activities or something to get our energy up. After our first session we decided on the theme "strength," based on what both groups said was important to them and their own stories. In the sessions that followed, we created short scenes out of story circles and human sculptures that were the result of brainstorming on the "strength" theme. As facilitators, we guided the process, stitching together the scenes and adding details and creative elements based on their ideas about the theme. It was a whirlwind project that ended in two performances. The women performed for fellow residents and staff in the room where we had rehearsed. The men suggested performing in the flagship soup kitchen and residence where they had all begun their journeys at Faith House. Both events were a celebration of their work and a chance to express themselves on their own terms.

Working where our participants lived was a convenience for our participants, but it was also a chance for us to get to know them on their turf. The houses were quite different. In Faith House, the men and women live in separate buildings about a mile apart and in very different neighborhoods. The men's house is across the street from a cluster of public housing buildings in a socioeconomically and culturally diverse

neighborhood. It's Manhattan, so there are signs of gentrification, but corner stores and take-out spots still prevail in this part of the city. The women live in an expensive neighborhood on a block of townhouses and upscale apartment buildings surrounded by chain drugstores and upscale restaurants.

The men's house shares space with a community after-school program and adult learning center. There are several "houses" (or dormitories) named after books in the Bible on different floors. There are offices for administration and services, classrooms, a rec room/living room, and a chapel, all spread over six floors. The feeling overall is that of a dorm and community center. The furniture is institutional, worse for wear, but there is a lot of life within its walls. There is a buzz in the air after chapel as men go off to complete chores or step outside for a bite or a smoke at the corner deli.

The women live in a nondescript but beautiful townhouse. It is decorated like an early-twentieth-century rooming house for rich young women. There are white bedspreads and rocking chairs in their rooms that they share, two to a room. The house is lovely, but we couldn't help noticing that none of the bathroom doors lock. The women were always home or were coming in from appointments when we arrived. They were not allowed out in the evenings. In comparison with the men's residence, the house is quiet, "buttoned up."

We were working where the men and women lived, but was it their home? As theatre-makers, we have always felt at home rehearsing or performing on stage. We wondered if the participants began to feel at home in the creative process as well. In her study on the meaning of home to people who have experienced homelessness, researcher Sarah Coward found that it was positive relationships that defined a positive home experience for people who have had housing instability throughout their

lives (i). In a way, our project, which aimed to strengthen community ties and celebrate the lives and identities of the participant-actors, aimed to foster a sense of home in this regard. In the following sections we reflect individually on how our own ideas of home affect us and this project.

Home is where you start from. – T.S. Elliot

A Look at Applied Theatre Facilitation- Esther

In 1927, my father was born in Alabama to his mother who was raped by his father. She was thirteen years old at the time, and beautiful. When I turned thirteen, my father became obsessed with the notion that I would end up like his mother – raped, pregnant, and eventually losing what was left of my mind in a world of men and alcohol. This obsession grew as I grew into my womanly shape. This early interaction in my home with my father would shape my existence as a woman of color applied theatre practitioner.

My entire motivation for working on the Faith House project was to prepare myself to change the world, starting with the root of a problem. Being a mother of a girl, I didn't want to shame her into not understanding her sexuality or strength as I had been. Instead, my goal was to work with people who have sexually victimized, abused, or raped others, specifically men. Men like my grandfather. This could only be achieved if I, as a woman, could hold my own with men. To my knowledge, the Faith House men were not rapists, nor were they abusive of girls and women. However, their being men was enough to put me on guard. It was enough for the voice of my father to echo in my head, very nearly shutting down my ability to be an effective applied theatre practitioner.

My advisor came to the fifth session at the men's home, as we were busy trying to put together a complicated scene. Afterward, he mentioned that I stood with my hands in my pockets while engaging the participants.

He believed that how I held my body was not conducive to creating an open environment. It wasn't. His observation bothered me. In this late hour with the men's group, I thought we had already arrived at a place of comfort. It seemed odd that I would still have my hands in my pockets. Why was I not able to open myself up completely? Was it the existence of my male advisor and my eagerness to please him? Was it the fact that I was still in a space where I was, no matter what, utilizing my womanhood to entice the participants to pay attention to me, listen to me, and follow my lead? To live straddling two worlds – one of being desired for sexual reasons, and another where you tap into what author bell hooks calls *life-giving eroticism*, and become a force toward transformative nature – is hard.

During our final reflection at the men's home, a participant asked whether "you women ever worked with men like us before, with our backgrounds, the life that we live, guys like us." *Guys like us?*, my co-facilitator replied, explaining that all the people she'd worked with were just people. People. People with lives with beginnings, middles, and ends. People who had done things but were now in a place where they were trying to do right.

This moment reshaped who I was as a woman of color applied theatre practitioner. We do this work not to change or strip away the stories of our participants or ourselves, but rather to engage in utilizing the spirit of transformation to embrace our creativity and allow space for growth. This is the magic of being an applied theatre practitioner. Playbuilding is the vehicle to begin the journey.

Home is What You Make It - Nicole

Growing up, I hated chores. I resented being told what to do. Home felt like a waystation until I grew up and could make my own choices. I

didn't appreciate the work it takes, as well as love, to make a home. Working in transitional housing, I never thought of it being their home. It was a stopover. They too had chores. I saw their chores as a form of punishment or control. Throughout our rehearsal process, the men would have to make sure their chores were done or covered. On the evening of our performance, we were shocked when one of the women showed up to the final rehearsal in a chef's hat and coat. She had to prep five chickens for roasting in the next hour! These interruptions were frustrating; I thought our work was more important.

Making theatre is not convenient. There are rules in theatre, too. There is a responsibility to show up. There are chores: setting up the space, breaking it down, repeating things over and over, unpacking and packing props. These need to be done. Yet, these tasks never feel like chores to me. They're rituals that make me feel at home wherever I am making theatre. The chores of the house, mixing with the rituals of the theatre, made me think about my own relationship to keeping house and making a home.

As an adult, I still hate chores. But chores are rituals too, like presetting props. The work put into the place we lay our head, the responsibility we have to the people we share it with makes it our own. I was wrong to dismiss the residences we worked in as just a stopover. The men and women who live there strive to make it their own. Not only because they take care of the chores, but because they take care of each other. If they didn't, our work would not have been successful.

A pastor at Faith House asked a woman if the process "changed" her. She replied, "Well for me. . . even though one of the hardest times of my life is right now. . . it gave me strength to know I could move and push even though I didn't want to do it, I was tired. This gave me the strength today to put it all together." There is something about gearing up for a

performance that makes people show up for their castmates, themselves, and the audience. One man reflected a month after the performance: “I didn’t expect or anticipate doing theatre in this part of my life . . . part of me looked at it as being a punishment to myself. But now you’re telling me I’m going to perform? I’m gonna act? It was so . . . normal. And to feel that, in this place, for me, was like a miracle.” Making theatre didn’t teach these men and women how to be caring or responsible or even creative. It gave them a new set of rituals to make their own.

Home is Where You Can Be Yourself! - Chelsea

Home means many different things to many different people all over the world. Home is not always a place, but can be a person or a state of mind. It can be a feeling of abandon, where you can ugly cry on the floor or pick your nose while simultaneously eating ice cream in your underwear. The feeling of home is not universal; it is not always a safe place or a feeling to easily cultivate. Home may not allow for privacy; you may have to share a bed or a room, much like the participants we worked with at Faith House. How do you create the feeling of home when you are in a transitional phase of your life? After leaving my parents and the home I grew up in, I had to create my own definition of home in a variety of places and cities. I’ve lived in a house with six other people. I’ve shared a room and bunk bed with someone I just met. I have lived in a tiny downstairs basement, slept on a cot for a month, and shared a kitchen with a mouse. Throughout all the transitional living situations in my life, I have had to redefine home time and time again.

One thing I learned is that I need a space where I can feel free to be myself and let loose. I need a nonjudgmental space where I can sing, talk to myself, and eat sauerkraut straight from the jar (I love sauerkraut). I thought about the space we created for our participants, and if we created

a place for them to be themselves, maybe feel at home? We wanted them to feel comfortable enough to connect, play, and create a performance that they felt ownership of. Theatre has that power. My partners and I created a warm and open space by bringing clementines, coffee, and donuts to the sessions. We used applied theatre rituals to lay out how we were going to work together to support one another. We started and ended our sessions with check-ins and check-outs. We created a “group contract” where we put up a large sticky note paper on the wall where we recorded ways that they would like to work together such as “constructive feedback, active listening,” and my favorite, “what happens in chapel Vegas, stays in chapel Vegas.”²

In a short period of time, our participants were able to open up and share with us and each other, all while creating an original play. The men were always joking around. For example, one game we regularly played in our workshops asked participants to use one piece of purple fabric to create as many settings, props, and costumes as possible; the men would play around with this fabric, even outside of this exercise, once calling the participant wearing the fabric like a cape, “Don King.” Likewise, the women broke out in song during every session and felt comfortable sharing their feelings with us in our check-ins. Although our participants were in transitional housing, the project provided a time to be expressive and be themselves in their current home.

Final Thoughts

There are probably as many meanings of home as there are people. When working with folks without a deed or lease, the importance of safety, ritual, and history is palpable. Who we are and how our homes

² Chapel Vegas is what the men named the room we had our sessions in. Whatever they say or do in the room stays in the room.

have shaped us affects our ability to show up in a space effectively for playmaking participants. Home can take on many shapes, sizes, colors, and sounds. Home becomes showing up every week with coffee. It is in the words between actors and directors. Or in the center of a circle of chairs. It is in our experiences, our needs, our actions.

Works Cited

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