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UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE EMPOWERING NATURE OF
STORY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts (Theatre Pedagogy) at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Abstract

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By Sarah Provencal, M.F.A. Candidate

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art (Theatre Pedagogy) at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Major Director: Dr. Noreen Barnes
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Technological growth has changed our relationships and interactions within society and theatre artists are calling into question the future of our art form. Are we still essential? And if so, how do we renovate our form in order to relate to our changing society? In my experience, I've found that all renovations of our art have one thing in common: the empowering nature of story. Story helps us to understand our experiences in life. It is not the self, the cause, or the goal that is behind the wheel, but the story itself. This thesis explores three instances of the empowering nature of story during my graduate studies.

Introduction

What I think is so exciting right now is that, as art is under attack all over the world, we are going to have to demonstrate that we add something to people's lives; we're going to have to demonstrate that we're not a luxury, decorative item but that we're essential and that we're dealing with deep issues of survival. Art is not the dessert part of your menu, it's the protein. It's not what comes after; it's what comes first. Art is the capacity to create a vocabulary where communication can take place across different people.... Until there is first a cultural life, there can be no economic, political or social life. ~Peter Sellars (Sellars, 135).

A vision said to me once, you've misunderstood life's instructions. You've been building walls when you should be knocking them down. You've fought to be heard when you should be silent, still, listening with all of your senses. You showed up for the test unprepared. You'll be deducted a full letter grade for each day you fail to speak all the languages of your sisters and brothers. Never one to turn down a challenge, I dive right in, swimming through alphabets as a J hugs my kneecap and something in Arabic tickles my earlobe. Minutes later, laughing and gasping, I come up for air. I wait for the punch line.

There isn't one. Only the laborious task of trying to communicate in a time where languages are innumerable and so much meaning vanishes in the course of translation. The world becomes smaller with each strung undersea cable and erected communication satellite. At the same time, we become further and further away from one another.

We live in a world driven by paradox. We seem to be well aware of the paradox. We embrace it like an abusive lover who provides us with consecutive highs and lows so intense that our heads spin too fast to grasp on to anything else. We're stuck in a cycle so dizzying we couldn't find our way out if we tried.

The paradox: all of my "needs" can be taken care of by the engine called Google. I can watch 'live' performances from the comfort of my own couch. I can meet someone online-- love and be loved by this other human without feeling their touch. I can hear the sounds of a culture, see their sights, and never meet a single one of them in person. There isn't much we can say when an entire month of Direct TV costs the same, or less, than one night out at the theatre. How could the antiquated technical equipment which struggling non-profits can barely afford possibly measure up with the high definition surround sound? And there is little reason to bother with the practices of Boal and Brecht who wanted to make art in order to incite revolution, when currently the fight itself is getting that art on its feet.

But you may be like me, and there is something entirely inexplicable that has drawn you to the theatre since a very young age. Factual and thematic analyses of my childhood circumstances and experiences would provide a logical conclusion far different from the die-hard thespian that I've become. I come from a blue collar background. My parents

never took me to the theater when I was a child. The arts are not a part of any of my family member's careers, and for the most part, their lives. I stumbled into theatre because I love to sing, and though I've tried to escape several times, I'm constantly drawn back in. It has something to do with that vision I just spoke of, that dream that is so vague and yet so prominent in my subconscious. I sometimes imagine myself the superhero who tries to escape the destiny of her identity, but always saves the world in just the nick of time. Or maybe I'm the child prodigy who throws paint on canvas and is praised by modern art critics around the world. The stage is my canvas. Story is my paint. I may not be a child anymore (literally speaking), but I still imagine heads turning suddenly in my direction, appreciating my ability to manifest such passion. Heads are currently ambivalent towards any given project I've done. I also haven't saved the world, yet. Even so, I know that through my art I've influenced lives for the better. I know that through the art of theatre many have changed lives. It may sound cliché, idealistic, and/or naïve, but I have seen it happen. This is what empowers me to keep going.

The lows are often longer and more prominent than the highs. I get really, really tired of fighting. Fighting in the name of art sounds good in theory. In practice, it's not so glamorous. Learning the technical jargon of grant applications and talking marketing strategies isn't as fun as ensemble movement exercises and creative play, but as essential. I've definitely lost friends who became tired of me begging them to come out to see a show. And you know what-- I would really love a new pair of shoes. Sorry, says my die-hard thespian conscience; there is a show this weekend and you'll have to play your part as a member of the theatre community and spend upwards of \$40 on that ticket instead. Friends my age in other careers have bought houses, started retirement funds, have health

insurance, and are beginning to have children. I ache with jealousy. I'm often overwhelmed with the exhaustion of begging and sacrificing—it weighs me down and sometimes I would like nothing more than to give up.

Here's the clincher: Absolutely nothing worth fighting for is going to be easy. But if you believe in something, and I mean actively and wholeheartedly *believe* in something, that belief becomes a razor that can cut through the challenges and boundaries the 21st century has erected. Make those challenges work *with* you instead of *against* you.

Let's say you buy a new computer. By the time you get home from the store that computer is out of date. Our world is constantly changing—improving, building up new walls, bridging more gaps, unearthing. This is a *good* thing, unless you'd like to give up indoor plumbing and your smart phone.

The following chapters explore methods of communicating story that deviate from the traditional form of live theatre. In each the use of story helps me, and several other characters in this journey, understand our experiences in life. Each one has helped me comprehend my vision, my dream of swimming through alphabets, more clearly. Each one has empowered me to fight harder for my art form.

The following chapters are a first attempt to articulate how live art is essential. This is where I am *now* on my journey—as I attempt to inspire, as Peter Sellars says, art to be upgraded from the dessert menu to the main course. Art is the protein and I am the chef attempting to wow my diners (once I get them through the door) with culinary magic. Because Sellars is right. We *are* currently in a position as artists where we have to prove

ourselves and our worth—a challenge when our true worth is as intangible as it is important.

Chapter One

Devising a Solo Performance Piece, or, the birth of my story baby

The old cliché goes “time heals all wounds.” I would have to disagree. Time is essential, of course, but some wounds fester with only time to treat them. What does help the healing process is communicating the pain of the wound. Talking about it, writing about it, dancing about it, the list goes on. In this experience, telling my story empowered my healing process and allowed me to close my wounds. Wounds as deep as these will never heal, but they become a part of my own narrative, a scar that will always exist but will not always be painful. The only thing that heals all wounds is a magic genie in a bottle who allows you an infinite number of wishes.

My wish is for every person to have the opportunity and courage to construct and perform a solo piece at least once if not multiple times in life. It’s an excellent exercise in objective self-reflection and a powerful healing tool. My experience in solo performance was under the guidance of Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates. Dr. T, as students call her, would say to us, “The story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself.” This advice helped me to get out of my own way and begin to write.

At the beginning, I felt unworthy. Why would an audience want to sit and watch me talk about myself for 20-30 minutes? Who am I to deserve such focus from a group? What have I done with my life to warrant that?

Dr. T taught me that it is about the story, not about me. I'm certainly a character in the story, but that is secondary. I learned from watching my peers workshop their own pieces that there is a clear difference between a piece that tells a story and a piece that is self-indulgent therapy. Though it sounds harsh, the truth is that a majority of the students in the class were very young and didn't have enough perspective to separate an experience from its emotional impact.

Now, I do not bring this up in order to put them down. I think that there is an enormous amount of courage that goes into doing this kind of work, and I very much enjoyed sharing this experience with each one of them. They showed me that there is a clear line between self-importance and story substance. The importance is not in the self, but in the story.

But there I am again, back at the question: "Who am I? What makes me worthy enough?"

The process began with free writing and experimenting with pieces, showcasing snippets or moments to our classmates. I began to think of the stories in my life that I tell. The deep, meaningful, influential parts of my life that I share willingly and whenever I get a chance. What makes my experience thus far special? Why listen to me?

I said from the beginning that I did not want to write about my mother. I remember telling friends that I didn't want this to be about my "mommy issues." I had put those to bed. I didn't need to talk about them; they were done. I had accepted the pain my mother caused me and moved on with my life. My mother is still in my life, but I was over the previous woes of her drug addiction and the impact it had on me in my young life. Nope, not going there, I claimed. Been there, done that.

This lady did protest too much. My solo show ended up being largely about my mother. I was far away enough from the experience that I could see past the emotions and into the story. I wrote a sequence that ended up catapulting me into a ping pong match between my mother's influence and an undergraduate professor's (more on her later) influence on me as a woman and a teacher. Here is an excerpt:

Sarah: I watched my parents custody battle like it was a daytime drama.

Actually, I watched it from my Dad's end—I made up my mom's side in my imagination. Montages set to Fleetwood Mac music played in my head.

[Sound Cue: Landslide by Fleetwood Mac plays]

Mother hugging one of my stuffed animals as she wept in her empty bedroom,

Mother eating dinner silently at the table, staring longingly at the empty chair beside her,

(Pretend to light cigarette)

(in child's voice) "mommy, please stop smoking, it's bad for you."

(Pretend to put out cigarette)

And when it was time for court, my mother stood on the stand, tears streaming down her face, “Let me keep my baby girl! I love her and I can’t live without her.”

Maybe I embellished things in my mind... I always knew that my father would win... but at the very least... I thought she would show up. They rescheduled, she didn’t show up. Third time... all she had to do was answer the phone.

Angry Male Family Member: Your mother never showed up. Your mother never answered the phone. Your mother has stolen from me to feed her addiction.

Sympathetic Female Family Member: We don’t know where your mother is. Your mother is wanted for fraud and contempt of court in three different states.

Sarcastic and laughing father: Your mother belongs in jail, but instead she’s in rehab. You did have a college fund, but your mom blew it up her nose.

Angry Male Family Member: Your mother.

Sympathetic Female Family Member: Your mother.

Sarcastic and laughing father: Your mother.

Sarah: My Mother.

I’m not positive who exactly Angry Male Family Member and Sympathetic Female Family Member represent, which in retrospect is very Brechtian of me. I believe it works in my favor that these people, who hurt me and contributed to how difficult it was for me to deal with my mother’s drug addiction, are simply characters now and not vivid memories.

It's just a story after all. I can remember how they made me feel and I developed their dialogue and characterizations that way, rather than striving for accuracy in portrayal.

Another big part of the show was the story of my relationship with a professor from undergrad. I changed her name in my writing to Cary Linda Feldman, just in case. You'll see why.

Cary was my guru. She was fierce. A strong, unrelenting woman, teacher, and artist who would lift me up and inspire me to heights to which I had previously been unaware that I was capable of reaching. She would also cut me down, and when she cut it was deep.

She made me feel like a million dollars my freshman year. It was a new and thrilling experience to have a woman who believed in me. My sophomore year, her Strasberg approach to acting knocked me down quite a few pegs, not just as an actor, but as a person. Feedback from her went beyond typical acting notes. It would dig into my insecurities and showcase my flaws, making me feel uncomfortable everywhere I went, not just onstage. If something was wrong with my performance she would tie it in to what was wrong with me as a person. This made her restored confidence in me, this time as a director, all the more spectacular. My junior year I was back in "Cary camp," as my peers and me used to say.

If you can't already surmise by now, Cary was a very volatile person who had strong opinions about each student. She either loved you or hated you, though I'm sure such an emotional classification is oversimplifying. She had very logical reasons for everything she said, did, and felt. So you were either in "Cary camp" or you were not. I was back in the club when I took her introductory directing course. I re-enact the scene in my solo performance in which she calls me into her office (under the guise of discussing an actor

commitment issue) and tells me that I have extraordinary ability. I would give almost anything to have that conversation on tape or a transcript of it. It was quite honestly one of the best moments of my life. I walked on air. I wanted to cry and giggle at the same time. That conversation meant the world to me. A strong, honest, intelligent woman believed in me. It was a first and it was beyond thrilling. I suppose it is only fitting that, a few years later, she would be the cause of one of the worst moments in my life.

Fast-forward a few years. I finish undergrad, spend a few years working, and then decide it is time for graduate school. I am back in touch with my guru. The story is fleshed out more in my solo piece, but essentially there was a huge miscommunication in one of our e-mail exchanges. She thought I had betrayed her and she cut me off. To put it mildly. Here is an excerpt from her e-mail, which is part of my piece:

“This e-mail you obviously copied me in on by mistake is appalling in its implications about your true character, but I’m glad to have received it. It reveals volumes about who you really are and enables me to put permanent space between us...

So, my dear, here are your first two free lessons about graduate school as you seek to enter the academy: (1) you need to grow up and fast; and (2) learn how to manage your e-mail so that you don't shoot yourself in the foot like this again. You had a supporter, and you lost her through your own dishonesty and clumsiness. Bad for you. Good for me because I don't have to field e-mails from you anymore sucking up to me and begging me to serve as your guru.

Now I'm not going to waste any more time on you. What you do need to know is I have the courage of my convictions and can stand by everything I have said to you in writing in a Federal Court of law. You can tell that to whomever you are spying on me for, it isn't confidential

Bottom line:

You do not ever contact me again, either by e-mail, US mail, telephone, or any other way you might consider contacting me. Not negotiable. If I am unfortunate enough to see you in person at a conference before I retire, do not address me nor approach me nor have anything to do with me. If you continue harassing me in any way, shape, or form, be assured I stand ready to take whatever legal steps I need to take to defend myself and my reputation."

I'm permanently expelled from Cary camp.

I think everyone has the realization some point in life that their parents are not superheroes, that they are simply *people*. They have aspirations and disappointments, flaws and impulses, and can't always handle life with grace and fairness. My parents made it painfully clear that they were not superheroes as I was growing up. The experience with Cary was that soul-shaking, universe-crashing-down episode for me. My superhero simultaneously ripped off her mask and broke my heart.

So when Dr. T gave us the assignment early in the semester to "Write a letter to someone telling them something you've always wanted to tell them," I knew immediately

that I would write to her. She never gave me a chance to explain myself, to tell her that I never betrayed her. So I wanted to tell her that, but I also wanted to tell her how she had also, in a sense, betrayed me. I started the letter with: Once again, you have taught me what it means to be a powerful woman. The experience of writing this letter showed me that this story needed to be a part of my piece.

I tried a few different topics to go along with the Cary story. I knew I wanted to share some of my experiences with my students at Northridge Middle School where I had been the drama teacher for about a year and a half. I struggled with how to portray these students without turning them into caricatures. The sad truth was that they really did fit into the stereotypes of an impoverished black community. I didn't want to seem like I was defaulting to that because I honestly was portraying them as they were. I was nervous to present this piece to the class. I'm very careful when it comes to things like race—I don't want to come off in the wrong way. I think I am scarred a bit from those years at Northridge. A student would ask to go to the bathroom during class, and I would say no. He hadn't been doing his work during class. "Miss. Pro," the student would say, "You [sic] racist." I learned that the best thing to do was shut those comments down without flinching: "This has nothing to do with the color of your skin; it has to do with the fact that you have none of your work done. Finish it and then we will talk." But inside I was hurt. I didn't want the students to think I was racist. Then again, the boy didn't really have to go to the bathroom either.

I didn't know how to approach my conflict of presenting an honest portrayal of the students, so I went to the class for help. I presented the piece, most of which ended up

intact in the final version, and waited for feedback— quite the opposite happened from what I expected. They loved the students and my portrayal of them. “I can hear their voices,” I remember Dr. T. saying. What a boost of confidence that was for me!

I started playing with the title “Self-Taught.” The piece was, so far, about my development as a woman and a teacher. Something was missing. I knew then that I couldn’t ignore my mother any longer. When I started writing about her a very angry poem came out of me, a poem rich in metaphors and similes. We had a guest artist visit our classroom one day who, in regards to constructing our piece, told us to ask ourselves “what style do you live in?” I pondered that question as I began to look for a uniting theme to the piece.

This may not be a style, but it’s how I process, well, everything. Ideas, happenings, interactions, etc. Metaphor. I live in metaphor. While experiences with my mother happened stage left, experiences with Cary and teaching at Northridge happened stage right, the piece was anchored by the idea of metaphor. After each snippet I would come back to center attempting to understand the experience through metaphor. I opened the piece by reading a sequence of metaphors and similes from index cards and letting them fall to the ground. These are the metaphors and similes written on the cards:

Being a teacher is to be reading poetry, constantly

Creating theatre is like trying to keep 1,000 candles lit on a breezy night

Being a woman is being a leaf on a tree, riding the seasons

Being a powerful woman is to hold a teddy bear in one hand and a grenade in

the other

Being in love is like being a smoker constantly out of cigarettes

Grad school is a special circle of hell, entered by the willing, who are trying to

seduce fate

Being a writer, an honest writer, is to have a conscience of a kleptomaniac

The biggest devastations in my life are like landslides. It always starts with

something very small, and then spirals out of control into disaster.

I would come back to them after finishing Cary's letter to me and search the ground, looking for a way to make sense of the situation. I said:

"It's a fallen hero story. It's more than a fallen hero story. It was a chance for me to have a woman in my life who... [sic] to have a woman in my life."

My solo performance piece ended up being about (I think, I hope) the beginning of my journey discovering what it means to be a good teacher and a strong woman. Notice the present tense of 'discovering.' I don't claim to have definitively discovered or anticipate doing so anytime soon. It's a step on a life long journey. The piece concluded in a way that aligns perfectly with rule #2: Ask difficult questions. Don't give answers. Here is how I ended my piece:

(Mother character, eating a bag of chips very sloppily. They fall on and down her shirt. She has a thick Boston accent.)

Mother: Ya know, I'm on a diet. I've been doing a really good job but, ya know, ya gotta treat yourself sometimes. And you're here and there's the

wedding so it's kinda like a holiday. Ya know, I don't know what your uncle's problem is Sarah. I mean—it's like he acts like he doesn't want me here! My own brother! I dunno, he doesn't think I've really said I'm sorry. I mean, what does he want me to do, get down on my knees and beg?!

(Sarah stops, puts the chips on the floor and shakes the crumbs off her shirt as she shakes off her mother. She moves back center, towards cards.)

Sarah: I want you to apologize until your face turns blue.

Until your breath reeks of remorse.

Try digging so deep into grief that you end up in China.

Build tiny apology ATMS so that anyone whose life you've turned upside down can drive up at any time and press the little Braille buttons that spout various phrases of regret.

You are a bullhorn in a coffee shop.

You, a sprinkler spouting lies, dehydrating our family until we had no choice but to break.

You fuck up relationships the way you chain smoke menthols, when you run out of what's in your pocket you bum from strangers.

“Hey—I fucked up my life, can I take a drag of yours?”

How long does “I’m Sorry” need to be your mantra before it’s tattooed on your teeth?

How much pleading until your palms ooze glue and you become a vision of Holy Mary, a flashcard for visual learners to understand how to ask for forgiveness.

Ask. For. Giveness.

Giveness—so fitting, when Takeness has been your favorite noun, playing strip poker with every person place and thing, leaving us all naked and broke.

You cheated. You were supposed to stop when it got too serious. But you were like a pilot in mid-flight, realizing that there is no stop, only the oxymoronic attempt to crash gracefully.

You can’t make things right any more than you can land an aircraft on a cloud, any more than you can deposit years of my childhood back into my life.

I started forgiving you before I knew what the word meant. It just would have been nice to hear those words. The only thing I ever got, at 25 years old, was this:

[Sound Cue: Landslide by Fleetwood Mac]

(Mother picks up chips and begins munching again)

Mother: You know Sarah, you’ve had a hard life. You’ve been through a lot, but I think it’s given you a lot of character. I mean, you didn’t ask to have a crack addict for a mother.

Lights fade as Landslide plays and mother character continues eating chips.

End.

Every person has a plethora of stories within them. Constructing them into a solo piece is to give birth to the stories so that they may exist without them. Otherwise, to extend the metaphor a bit as I am so prone to do, you walk around pregnant for much longer than you should be. When they come to term, it's time to let them out. But not before they come to term, as I saw with so many of my young classmates who presented raw and shapeless bits of work. Let your story baby grow and wait for it to be ready to come out.

The birth is essential. Sometimes long, painful and tedious, but the time you devote to it is worth it. It allows for objective view of your experiences, which allows for acceptance, which allows you to move on with life free of that burden. Perhaps not completely free (after all, it is a child now and will always be part of your life), but at least lessened.

Any kind of performing art builds confidence—be it public speaking, everyday communication, or simply presence. Solo performance is no different. Yet, the experience it provides goes deeper than most. The story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself. Looking at your own life experiences as “story” gives an objective view to parts of life, or moments in life, or one's current life. It allowed me to see past the emotional content and see the actual character of myself interact with the other characters and plot devices

around her. It's no longer about what is happening to you or how you have been victimized. You are now a character in the story of your life.

This kind of view has allowed me to stop taking myself so seriously. Each decision I make no longer has to be a slippery slope that leads either to success or despair. An objective view allows for simplicity in decision making. An objective view allows for my emotions to be more focused on relationships than on decisions made in my career. Objectivity allows these decisions to be considered on a more global than personal level. An objective view allows me to separate the personal (the character) from the plot (how my life unfolds). As I am a bit of a control freak either by nature or by nurture, it is strangely comforting for me to come to the realization that I do not always control the circumstances of my life. I cannot micromanage my plot. I *can* micromanage my role in my relationships and my personal health, but that is about it. And that's about all anyone can really handle.

At the time I wrote the piece, Fall of 2010, I labeled it "a work in progress." I'm deleting that disclaimer now. I'm done working on it. I've given birth, raised it up as best I could, and now I am letting it go. I'll visit it again, I'm sure. I'll need to. But now it's time to make new stories.

Chapter Two

Directing Karen Hartman's Troy Women

“Myth is much more important and true than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is.”

— Joseph Campbell

With nothing but respect for journalism, the facts amalgamated do not measure up to the preciousness of theme. The following segments are excerpts from my experience directing Karen Hartman's adaptation of *Troy Women*. I would never have been able to direct a factual, journalistic representation of post-war women's struggle and helplessness without the myth. Using it allowed me to dive into the story, explore the themes, and get to know the characters as an artist, not a journalist. The story empowered me as a director to tackle an extremely difficult and relevant issue.

No Apologies

I want my kind of theatre to be important and beautiful. Approaching my second semester at VCU, I knew I wanted to direct something. I had been impressed by the amount of female talent in the department so I knew that I would be able to cast a show featuring

strong women. I'd stumbled into Dr. Noreen Barnes's office one day and, for reasons I can't remember, stumbled out with a copy of Divine Fire, an anthology of contemporary retellings of Greek myths. Among them was Karen Hartman's *Troy Women*. I knew by page three that I was going to direct it. I felt the text reverberating in my bones. I felt the story in my gut. Its beauty, its pain, and its significance to us today sank into my body at each turn of the page. I was itching by the time I finished. I had to stage this.

The combination of Hartman's writing and Euripides's story, enticed me with the timeless relevance that the script echoes, largely because of the freedom that comes with staging mythology. In the preface to her anthology of Greek play adaptations Ellen McLaughlin writes:

What the Greek plays have given me as a writer is a means of taking on eternally relevant issues unapologetically. The Greeks ask the hardest questions, always: "What is it to be human? What do we owe to each other? How do we negotiate with the divine? What sense can we make of the inevitability of human suffering?" And beyond this, the plays have given me a means to write about war. The great tragedians' intimate, clear-eyed understanding of war and its horrors has been tremendously helpful to me as a writer trying to thrash out my response to the wars of my own time.

(McLaughlin, preface, xv).

I can stop being afraid of anachronism when I work with the Greek myths. There is a fear of staging atrocity drama. Because there is so much lost in the destructive nature of wartime, it is hard to capture a story in accurate detail. With the Greek myths, I can focus on the essence of the story instead of the specific nature of the conflict.

Of course, that is an irony in itself. Wars are fought over details. The consequences of war defy detail—human suffering is universal and the effects of wartime on the family are nebulous. It's as if the cause of the war is a mere drop of water within the effect, a giant cloud that forms a shadow across lifetimes.

But what do we do? What does an over-educated middle class American girl do? A girl who, when her country goes to war, barely feels the effects? That could be a bit of an understatement, but compared to the women being raped in the Middle East what we feel here is a mere aftershock of the earthquake that tears their lives apart.

I agree with McLaughlin and I love that she uses the work “unapologetically.” At first, I constantly felt like apologizing when I was doing the dramaturgy work for *Troy Women*. I strongly feel that these kind of plays need to have a context. We can't just present the stories as mythology. The reason we still present the stories at all is because they are still so relevant. Thus, we need to help the audience by revealing connections. Remember, we are not spoon feeding, but giving them opportunities to make connections.

So there I was, researching contemporary war-torn countries and the lives of the oppressed women who live there. Suddenly, I felt bad about having indoor plumbing. I felt guilty spending \$5.00 on one drink at Starbucks. I felt petty for having worried about my outfits and graduate school loans. But what am I supposed to do about all of this? I

mentioned my helpless feelings to a colleague who said, “but you are doing something beautiful in giving these women a voice.” I still felt trivial. Knowing what I now know— shouldn’t I be packing up my belongings and joining a relief movement? Shouldn’t I use the privilege of my circumstances to save another life? How can I put on this little play at this little college when so many need so much help?

Maybe I should have put on my superhero cape and jumped into the Islamic struggle. But if America is one of the richest countries, thus one of the most powerful, in the world, perhaps my role is to wake up my fellow Americans to what is going on outside our borders. Maybe this is me putting on my “anthropologist of the human spirit hat” and crusading for women’s rights in the Middle East in my own way. Or perhaps that is my excuse for not being brave enough.

That is my apology quandary. Who am I to tell this story? Having the myth to stage eliminates that quandary, because I can focus more on telling the story than on preventing potentially disrespectful anachronism (remember, wars are fought over details, and the wrong color scarf could change everything about a production).

So I had my conviction. Now I needed my venue. I asked the organization that produced student work for the space. For the purposes of my production proposal I was able to condense my passion for the worth of this piece into something short and sweet. I wrote:

This is a story that needs to be told. We are missing something huge. In all our talk of war, we speak of strategy, casualty, causality, victors, and

economics. We learn about war as a game of tactics. There's another side of the story that is neglected: the stories of women, the stories of wartime's effect on the home.

Troy is a myth. Right? Troy may or may not have actually existed. The story of Troy, however, has been happening over and over again as far back as any historian can tell. Until the woman's side can be heard, atrocity will continue to strike us.

It is time to listen.

My proposal was accepted. My brain was terrified, my heart was racing, and my bones were tingling. That meant it was time to begin.

Corresponding with the Playwright

Through Dr. Barnes, I was able to get the e-mail of the playwright, Karen Hartman. I sent her the following e-mail:

Dear Ms. Hartman,

I am getting in touch with you via Caridad Svich—she is a good friend of my mentor.

I am a theatre graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University. Your adaptation of *Troy Women* is an inspirational component of my thesis. I want to workshop the piece, a project culminating in performances free and open to the public. I think it is so important that people see this work. *Troy Women* has been amazing to dive into and as I've

prepped myself dramaturgically for rehearsals, I daily find myself falling more deeply in love with the script.

I'm sure that you are very busy, so though I have many questions I'd love to ask you, I will narrow it down to just two in hopes that you might have the time to write a quick e-mail to a peon graduate student such as myself:

References to your play in reviews, etc, call your adaptation "modern."
In writing this, did you have an intended time period or was it meant to be open?

What would your nightmare production of this play be like?

Thank you so much for writing this play and for reading this e-mail.

Sincerely,

Sarah Provencal

To my delight and surprise, she wrote back the very next day! She said:

Hi Sarah,

Thanks for writing. I'm so glad you love the script. The credit goes to Euripides!

Those are good questions.

I meant to set the play in an open time period. That seems crazy to me now but it was true at the time. I think it could work in modern dress or in more classic Greek dress. It could probably work set in another specific period, as

well. I was careful not to use language that is too specifically modern (ie [sic] the weapons are spears, not guns).

The most "modern" elements of the script are Cassandra and the chorus. I made Cassandra's language modern because she's a prophet, and so she lives more in the future than the other characters, and it made intuitive sense for her to speak that way. The Chorus is modern in two ways - one is that they are differentiated, rather than a mass, which is a more individualistic approach (and I think more fun for an ensemble company). Also, towards the end of the story, when they are preparing to leave Troy, the Chorus gains some insight about their place (or loss thereof) in history, and speak with a more contemporary understanding.

I guess a nightmare production would be too stage-y Greek, not real and grounded, trying to push the tragedy. Another nightmare would be the women weeping all the time. Also what's tricky about Hecuba is that things start out REALLY REALLY BAD but then get WORSE so she can't blow her emotion right at the beginning. I feel like she doesn't truly break until her grandson is killed.

I wrote this play in grad school, and it has only ever been performed by student and amateur groups, who have given it a great life. So you're not a peon! You're the core!

By the way, you probably know that Troy Women is published and licensed by playscripts, and you need to purchase rights even for performances that are free to the public (cost is reasonable). So please contact them if you

haven't already done so.

Thanks again, and good luck!

Karen

I was thrilled to have received this e-mail. It would come to help me during the process of reinforcing to the cast not to push the tragedy. Instead of just my own clout as their director, I could now say, "Remember what Karen Hartman said: Do not push the tragedy!"

Balancing Contradictions: Portraying Hecuba

The casting process found me with an abundance of talented females from which to choose. There were not nearly as many males, but I was happy with the ones I did have. All of the women (and the young men) were lovely to work with in their own ways. A particular challenge was in the portrayal of Hecuba. The young lady I cast was the perfect one, of all who had auditioned, to play the role. As it turned out, although she was a second year theatre performance major, this was her first role in a full-length play. Also, she was onstage the entire play, which was a challenge for me blocking-wise.

Though it was her first production, she took her acting classes very seriously and was eager to apply those skills and techniques to this role. Working with her was a lovely experience. She brought so much to the table as an actor. She works hard and her work is largely physical, as opposed to the overly intellectual approach which, in my opinion, is deathly boring to watch and work with.

There are a few reasons why I loved working with this young lady and why I cast her in the role:

1) She is stunningly beautiful in a regal and mature way. It is easy to look at her and believe that she would be a queen. Hecuba is a very difficult role for anyone to play at any age, but more specifically difficult for someone so young. (She was only 19 years old at the time.) Her beauty was both captivating and tragic when dressed in the rags that were her costume.

2) She responded very well to my directing during callbacks. She is smart but doesn't let herself become too wrapped up in the intellectual life of her character. She allows herself to feel and move. She listened. She made choices.

We had a great working process together from the beginning to the end. We caught up after the process was over and discussed the experience in retrospect. She told me one of her biggest challenges was finding the humanity in someone so prideful. Hecuba wants to provide for her grieving family, but at the same time maintain her Trojan dignity. She struggles dealing both with the woes of war, the grief of the loss of her husband and many of her children, and caring for the children that are left.

The balance of contradictions is something we would struggle with together during our process. We wanted to make Hecuba a real, relatable person out of this mythological figure— not a stereotype or caricature. There needed to be a genuine person beneath the title, raw feelings beneath the façade of unbreakable pride. Throughout the play, she mainly shows her outer mask, her public persona. So we searched for those moments in the story where her inner mask, her private self, peers its head.

One way she dealt with this challenge was to imagine scenes that did not happen onstage. She painted those pictures in her mind: what did her husband's death look like?

What did she see other women go through? These pictures increased the urgency of the story for her.

Another challenge for the actress playing Hecuba goes along with a theme present in chapters one and three of this thesis: mothers are not superheroes. Grappling with the idea that mothers have faults was something new for her, being so young. We all have a natural inclination to venerate our parents—an illusion sometimes shattered at a young age or never really shattered at all. I certainly wouldn't say that this actress's perception of her own mother changed during the process (or at least not *because* of the process), but this was another dichotomy for her to wrestle with as Hecuba. For the character to be simultaneously a loving mother and filled with a venomous thirst for revenge was something new for her.

I had touched upon modern parallels (the dramaturgy that had made me feel so helpless) during our first read through of the text and sometimes during rehearsals. But I quickly realized that this information was secondary for my actors trying to live in their characters— something I didn't want to destroy. As actors that *should* be their priority, and I didn't want to overload them with my research, forcing them to retreat into their heads and out of their bodies. But what I did want them to understand was why I was doing *this* play. I asked on the audition form, "Why does this show appeal to you?" Most answers were along the lines of being drawn to a show with strong female characters; some professed a passion for Greek mythology. These responses were fine. I didn't expect anyone to walk into the audition declaring that they wanted to do this play in order to

change American perceptions of war. We are in a college setting, and I realize that most students audition for anything that comes their way. I know I did.

That said, I still felt it was important to share with them my passion for this particular story. I said to them at an early rehearsal: nowadays we can look at pictures from war and gloss over them; we are sometimes so under affected. This story is, on one hand, just another war story. On the other hand, you should be offended on behalf of your character that I put the word 'just' and 'war' in the same sentence. This is not just another war story. This is your story.

The Injustice of Cause and Effect Case #1: Paris and Helen

Mclaughin says, "For the Greeks... the Trojan War provided them with the means to consider war in the abstract, as a phenomenon separate from politics or any sense of patriotism " (preface xvi). This is the direction I took with connecting my cast to their stories. I got rid of any reference to any 'real' times or places. I made the set and costume as ambiguous to time period as possible. I spoke in themes, in feelings, in relationships. I spoke of the unfairness of cause and effect. Helen and Paris had an affair, and thus an entire country is obliterated. Your husband was Trojan, and thus he was killed. You were born Greek; thus you must kill this infant.

This approach proved to be more powerful than any photos, videos, or testimonies of current war stories that I could provide.

Helen and Paris had an affair, and thus an entire country is obliterated. I tried to highlight this ludicrous cause and effect by adding a dance between Paris and Helen at the

very beginning of the show. I had an incredibly talented choreographer who had already agreed to help with the chorus, and when I proposed the idea of the Paris and Helen dance, she immediately agreed to choreograph it. The dance, I told her, should be playful and lustful. Towards the end, we would see Helen make her choice to leave with Paris. The song was “When I Was a Young Girl” by Feist. The song felt like it was made for this moment—its rhythm was at once enticing and dangerous. Lyrics such as “My poor head is aching, my sad heart is breaking. My body’s salivating and Hell is my doom” fit right in with my theme. Some blues guitar licks were accented by the choreographer’s amazing work. The dance was exactly what I wanted. The arrogant Paris and the conflicted Helen told an amazing story in that three minute song. First we saw a playful seduction in which Paris confidently pursued her, and Helen, like a cat, mischievously teased him. Then, we saw it get more serious once they touched. They almost kissed. Suddenly, Menelaus was heard laughing offstage. Then the lighthearted play sank as they both sensed the gravity of what they were doing. Helen almost leaves to return to her husband. But then she stops and extends her hand out behind her, allowing Paris to take her hand. He smiled his proud smile, takes her outstretched hand, and they ran offstage together only a moment before Menelaus enters. He had a moment onstage alone as he realized what had just happened. He let out an angry cry during which the Feist song dissolved into sounds of war, planes and bombs and screams, which in turn dissolved into the sound of crashing waves, and then entered Poseidon.

Transitioning from that playful and sexy song to the ruins of Troy, I hoped to create for the audience an opportunity to see the cause and effect of the affair and the war.

The Injustice of Cause and Effect Case #2: Chorus as Community

Another cause and effect that I had explored with the cast was: your husband was Trojan and thus he was killed. This cause/effect was something I explored with Hecuba, Andromache, and the chorus. For the actresses playing Hecuba and Andromache, there were several references in the text with which they could paint the portrait of their dead husbands. For the chorus it required a bit more work.

The chorus was one of the highlights of working on this show—after I overcame the challenges of casting it. Several of the actors to whom I initially offered a chorus role turned it down. When I finally solidified the five women, one of them presented me with a list of conflicts that she hadn't previously had. We mutually agreed it would be best for her to drop out. Another became very sick a few weeks into rehearsal and had to drop out. I was able to replace them both and ended up working with five truly lovely women.

In the script, each of the five is only referred to by a number. My first task was to have them create a story. I had them imagine their husbands or fiancés, and then how they were killed. Before the war, what had they imagined their lives would be like? Extremists always target women, I told them. By comparison, the men are almost always shown mercy by being killed. The women would be raped and traded like any other war spoil. This is the effect. The cause is that you were born in Troy.

The chorus surpassed my expectations. The sound of the women's voices in unison, overlapping, or echoing each other was very powerful. It achieved a scope larger than just five women—the women became representative of all the Trojan women, a voice for those left voiceless. Their ambiguous identity widened the possibility of who they may represent,

thus allowing the audience the opportunity for connection. I wish I could have a Greek chorus in every show I do—it is such an amazing way to reach into the universality of the story and provide the audience an opportunity to relate. Having the chorus shows that the story isn't just about Hecuba, or Helen, or any person in particular. It's about the community. In the case of *Troy Women*, the community was women affected by war. Giving voice to the community is the epitome of what theatre should do. Tori Haring-Smith captures it so well: "Theatre began as a way in which a community could tell its stories to itself. In this way, the theatre event grew out of the community and was an inherent part of it... In Greek theatre, the chorus was a visible microcosm of the community on stage" (Haring-Smith, 98).

Chorus *is* community, and the women themselves became a community. The young women in the chorus were a range of ages (as wide as one could get at a university), with two graduating seniors, two sophomores, and one freshman. After the run was over, I spoke to them each individually about their experiences. They echoed each other, the same way they had onstage, without knowing it. Their favorite part about being in the chorus was the relationships they had with the other women onstage. This bonding was something that had given me great joy to watch unfold. I noticed that more and more of their movements would become in sync—ones we hadn't intentionally choreographed to be in sync.

Their synchronicity was something born largely out of the amount of focus it took to be in the chorus and remain onstage for the entire show. Also, their lines would sometimes be simultaneous or they would finish each other sentences, which created a great deal of

focus from them. A rhythm developed between the women in order to make them in sync. One of them called the chorus a single, living, breathing unit that existed entirely to tell the story. That, she continued, is the most important role anyone could ever have. The story was their life force—no beginning, no end, they were a universe constantly expanding. Even now, she said, there is nothing like being in a Greek chorus, because you engage in an act of being part of something bigger than you are while also retaining your individual identity.

Like Medea's children who fall victim to her knife for no reason other than that they are *there*, that there is no other place for them to be, the women of the Trojan community—women who did not choose this war, women who were not key players in the struggle, women who simply lived and loved and slept and ate in Troy, women who were *just there*—they take the front seat of suffering, stuck in the passenger side without a fraction of control over the situation. Living in Troy was the cause.

The Injustice of Cause and Effect Case #2: Murdering the Innocent

Another cause and effect I explored was: you were born Greek, thus you must kill this infant. The character Talthybius—the messenger—is one of the most difficult roles.

The actor playing Talthybius was cast because he looked young and was able to capture an innocent awkwardness within the horrific events. Talthybius is Greek. He has been in Troy for much of the war and had gotten to know some of the Trojans. His Greek superiors give orders he must execute. He is young, and the orders are often brutal and harsh. Talthybius represents something truly instrumental to the theme of this story—he eliminates a good versus bad dichotomy. The Greeks did horrible things, yes, but they are

humans. Talthybius wrestles constantly with obeying orders and treating the Trojans like humans. The worst is when he is ordered to take the child Astynax from his mother's arms and to throw him off of a cliff. The deed is awful, but the consequences for not performing it are even more dire. This moment was very challenging for this freshman actor—he takes the infant and held him in his arms and speaks to him and then to the men offstage: “I am so sorry for your mother. You are going to stand on your daddy's wall and jump. It's been decided. Do you know decided? Someone else take him. I can't be the herald of this” (Hartman, 48).

As it turned out, this actor had never held an infant before. We took a journey together—Astynax was played by two 1lb bags of sugar wrapped in blankets. The actor took the 'child' in his arms and I walked him through the sensations. How small a baby's nose is. How they gaze at you so innocently, small and vulnerable. How the baby's entire body would be barely bigger than his forearm. How the baby would smell and how soft his skin would be. The actor was shaking, visibly, and I told him to breathe and speak his lines. It was powerful. I checked to make sure he was ok, not wanted to traumatize this young actor. Now look, I said, they are just sugar bags.

While directing Karen Hartman's *Troy Women*, I kept getting the feeling that what I was doing was simultaneously important and futile. Futile because so much suffering is happening all over the world, and *all* I'm doing is telling a story about it. Important because suffering is happening all over the world, and *I'm* telling a story about it. Without stories we are isolated. The Trojan story works so well because the Greeks can represent any hegemonic system of control, thus any culture can connect with the themes. We need

to evaluate experience and history in a light other than pure fact—the causes, not the effects. Sellars speaks to this theme when he says, “In Greek theatre you weren’t permitted to show the moment of tearing the eyes out because that’s not the point. The point is not that someone tears their eyes out, the point is why would someone tear their eyes out. This is the big question that our society does want to ask. We want to say, ‘Yes, we hate crime’ but nobody wants to say, ‘Wait a minute, what created crime? Why did somebody do something?’” (Sellars, 129).

History teachers tell us at very young age that we learn history so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. However, a mere stacking up of facts does not give us the scope we need in order to understand experience. This is where stories come in. Theatre is a medium with which to tell these stories so that we can better understand and make connections with our sisters and brothers who are far away. *Troy Women* empowered me as a director, helping me unapologetically tackle a huge and important issue.

The following pictures were taken by Esther Greene. They are chosen because they capture the essence of the story and my concept.



Paris and Helen



Paris and Helen hear Menelaus



Andromache saying goodbye to Astyanax



Cassandra



Chorus- Waiting to hear fate



Chorus- Remembering Troy



Chorus- May Helen Burn



Chorus, Singing the Dirge for Astyanax



Hecuba, Refusing to leave Troy

Chapter Three

Finding the Me in Medea

Dear Medea,

I used to think that stories were preventative medicine. Then I lived yours.

I loved him brazenly. I was an aching saxophone and he played my heartstrings the way a jazz soloist caresses his keys.

Faith has gotten me nowhere. Love has gotten me to a place much worse.

I am a hot air balloon.

The love that fueled my flight has turned out to be nothing but hot air. I am deflating rapidly, uncontrollably, and I am afraid of where I might land.

He has taken it all. He has left me with one thing only—a fierce, consuming vengeance.

A chalk outline of my former self, he watches with indifference as my innards ooze and puddle around his feet.

I used to ask myself—How could she do it?

Now I ask—What choice did you have?

For thousands of years we've kept the mythological character Medea alive. Through restaging and adaptation many details have come and gone, but the basic formula used to create a Medea has stayed the same:

Step 1: Fall in love

Step 2: Sacrifice everything for him.

Step 3: Be betrayed by him as he chooses a lesser woman over you.

Step 4: Left with nothing, you do the only thing left for you to do in order to hurt him-- kill your children.

Step 4 is, unfortunately, the most prominent of the steps in the formula. Most people remember Medea as 'that woman who kills her kids.' Now, we do not live in a society that condones child killing, so why do we love this play so much? Why *Medea*? As producers of theatre, isn't the choice to stage *Medea* the choice to give voice to a child slayer? As consumers of theatre, aren't our expectations of betrayal, rage, and vicious murder fulfilled when we see the play? So why do we keep on presenting this particular story? Why do we keep buying tickets to see this baby killer? And what does that say about us? It proves that, as much indignity theatre has undergone under the weight of commercialism, we are still not afraid of the difficult questions. The fact that we still pay homage to this myth through restaging and reinterpretation says that our culture craves the kind of difficult self-reflection this kind of story demands.

Just as history books detail the effects and skip over the cause, with theatre's new attention to detail and practicality it is common nowadays to miss out on the story by getting hung up on the plot. Realism has brought us to a place that can make storytelling largely ineffective—a place where we cannot see the forest for the trees. New developments in theatrical technology paired with the film industry's inclination to make everything as lifelike as possible have created an audience with lackluster expectations. Our obsession with reality T.V. and crime solving dramas has created an attention to detail within an audience that is truly detrimental to appreciating the art of storytelling. This is why we categorize Medea as a child killer. This has made us completely misunderstand this story.

An understanding of story lies not in the facts, not in the details of the plot. As every story has an impetus, in that impetus is where we find our meaning and our reason for telling it in the first place. Robert Edmond Jones identifies this as the "truth" in theatre, which "stands above and beyond mere accuracy to fact" (Jones, 396). Just as we don't watch a dance to experience the range of muscle and bone movements of the human body, we don't come to the theatre to see a replica of our lives in all their finely detailed banality. There's something much, much more. Jones continues, "In the theatre, the actual thing is never the exciting thing. Unless life is turned into art on the stage it stops being alive and goes dead" (396).

If Medea's life were on the news or an episode of a crime solving drama, we would have the actual thing—the ordered events directly preceding the crime and their conclusion. The story would be, as Jones puts it, dead. So how to find the truth? The truth

lies within the exploration not of the facts behind the murder, but in the events preceding. In other words, how could she do it? How does a mother come to a place where rage so incoherently skews her maternal instincts as to make her kill her children? It would be easy to dismiss her as a homicidal maniac, to claim that she has nothing to do with us, and to lift our chins in disdain of actions that we are so nobly above. But to do that is to kill the story.

The story is alive when we see Medea's journey and all that she goes through for Jason. In Dr. Noreen Barnes's experimental version, Medea is physically crippled with each task she performs for him. The way she tears her children apart in this version is a visceral and horrifying act— but because we saw in a physical and literal way how her journey with Jason affected her, we see *why* she needs to perform this act. This is the art that Robert Edmond Jones is referring to—and it is so relevant with modern culture. Presenting Medea's story in the contemporary realist fashion turns her into a faceless monster. Barnes's version also turns her into a monster, but an entirely different kind. We are unable to hate Medea if we see how her rage has been created. If we understand how she got to this place we can see ourselves perhaps ending up there, too. For the same reason courtroom juries in the United States soften verdicts if an evaluation of a crime finds the alleged criminal mentally unstable or caught in the heat of passion rather than premeditation, our disgust towards Medea is softened if we understand that she wasn't a monster to begin with—rather the way Jason treats her and likewise her unjust circumstances made her that way. The experimental version, by showing the painful journey of sacrifice she made for Jason and thus the demonstrative effect of his betrayal, makes her human. She becomes a monster, but she did not start out that way.

Kenneth McLeish's version is an unfortunate example of a *Medea* adaptation that does turn Medea into a monster. It's hard not to side with cool-headed Jason who at first presents a reasonable explanation as to why he is marrying the princess and then later becomes sentimental over the death of his children and accuses Medea of killing them merely "for sex! For jealousy!" Medea's last words in the play are "No. Request denied." This presents her as cold and unfeeling—how could the audience like a character like that? A begrudging and irrational Medea such as McLeish's makes the play more about Jason than about a wronged woman. This is severe injustice on the playwright's part.

To hearken back to our history teachers again, if there is no understanding of how we got to a place then there will be no understanding of how to avoid going there again. If we don't understand how the Nazis were able to take over Germany, we may have another Holocaust on our hands before we blink twice. Holocaust deniers are the same by nature as those who dismiss Medea simply as a child killer. Medea holds an essential place in the feminist canon of literature and misrepresentation is a serious offense against women.

The place she holds in the feminist canon is not so much because of her actions, but because of what she represents. We need to evaluate her as a mythological character in order to recognize what she teaches us about our own lives. Mythology reveals what human beings have in common. Stories reach the eternal—they are a life force all their own, connecting us to the mysteries of the human experience and guiding us to feel what Joseph Campbell calls "the rapture of being alive." An advocate for seeing the mythology that is behind literature and the arts, Campbell continues on to say that "myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life" (Campbell, 5). In other words, they show us of

what we are capable. Myths can be inspiration to the good we should aspire to, warnings of what we could become if we go astray, accounts of the plight of the human spirit, and comfort that we are not alone on our journey. They can be—if we accept them as myths and do not attempt to gain clear-cut instruction from a genre that teaches essence, not fact. It is a genre that explores the human experience—it does not give concrete answers. It is the same dichotomy Robert Edmond Jones speaks of with his comparison between truth and fact. An understanding of Medea’s story requires a mythological, truth-seeking perspective. In other words, we don’t interview her as a potential roommate, rather we view her as a potential self—a self that we should be afraid of. To understand her creation is to understand how to prevent this raging demon from peering its head—a demon that may very well exist deep within all of us, roused only if subjected to the kind of injustice and humiliation as Medea.

The respect we have for her can be driven by fear—but we must respect. Campbell makes a wonderful analogy when he talks about acknowledgment of roles; “When a judge walks into the room, and everybody stands up, you’re not standing up to that guy, you’re standing up to the robe that he’s wearing and the role that he’s going to play” (Campbell, 12). To pay homage to her is not necessarily to approve her. Rather, it is to support the plight of the women she represents. She symbolizes something larger than the literal actions that she performs. She is a crusader for equality between genders. Therefore, those who support this cause should be standing up when Medea walks in the room.

Ani DiFranco, in her song “Grand Canyon,” questions “Why can’t all decent men and women call themselves feminists, out of respect for those who fought for this?” Even with

all the negative stereotypes that feminists have—the bra burning man haters with hairy armpits—still we should not hesitate to identify as one of them, out of respect for all that they fought for. The same with Medea. We stand up for what she fights for. As artists, we are standing up for Medea when we create art from her story—we stand up for her and against the abuse of women.

Her abuse is at the core of the story. None of this would have happened had she not been betrayed by the man she sacrificed everything for. Medea is, as Helene Foley says “an empowered victimized person, as opposed to a disempowered victimized one” (Wren, 23). It’s refreshing! A woman who fights for equality, who seeks to even the scales of suffering! Her circumstances-- unfair, undeserved, and suffocating—make *why* she killed her children so much more important than *that* she killed them. As Cherrie Moraga points out, “in a society that doesn’t allow for wholeness for women, perverted acts take place” (Wren, 60). Women today are still trying to learn what Medea already knows—that society is not going to award us wholeness. We need to demand it.

Here in America, women need a lot more than they are given. Proper education about the way that adolescence changes our bodies and emotions is lacking more often than it is present. This is the wholeness that Moraga speaks of, for not only are women not allowed all the information they need in order to make healthy decisions, they are often not even allowed to make the decision. The plethora of rationale behind why a woman should be making the decisions about her own body merits an indefinite amount of its own research papers. I will not attempt that here. Rather, I argue that the wholeness Moraga

talks about is fair treatment regardless of gender, easy access to knowledge, and the power to make our own choices.

Currently, only ten states in the U.S. allow minors to have an abortion without parental consent or notification. Endless speculation can be made as to *why* a minor would get pregnant unintentionally, but to attribute a majority of cases to lack of education about birth control methods is a safe assumption. Lack of education equates to lack of wholeness. And the perverted acts which take place in the wake of such depravity? Those come into play when the minor is forced to tell their parents, because as the Feminist Women's Health Center website says "when teens feel they cannot tell their parents, they have compelling reasons, such as mentally ill or chemically dependent parents, family violence or incest.... Desperate teens seek illegal abortion or even commit suicide rather than tell their parents." Depravity begets depravity and when a female hasn't been given either knowledge or self-respect from her family, she is already unfortunate enough to be ill-informed and now, put in the situation of an unintentional pregnancy, she has no way out. Illegal abortions, the choice to commit suicide, these are the perverted acts that take place when women are denied wholeness.

Good parental communication is something that cannot be enforced. The government can't mandate parents to be responsible and open up communication with their children. Parental consent laws are a useless attempt at abdicating responsibility of the home to educate girls and forcing it on the government. But the government doesn't teach practical solutions either. If a girl is not educated by her family nor the government and an unexpected pregnancy results, she is now trying to solve a problem that she is not

equipped to deal with. She is expected to solve a puzzle for which she has not been given all of the pieces. The puzzle will not be solved because she doesn't have the whole thing, and thus a perverted act (suicide, illegal and unsafe abortions) will inevitably take place. Moraga, though not speaking specifically to abortion legislation, has presented us with an alarming parallel between the pregnant minor and Medea. A girl, lacking support from her family and facing over-regulation from the government, feels like she has no control over her own body and does something rash and radical. Medea, left with nothing and having no control, commits a horrifying atrocity. It's essentially the same situation: A female who is not allowed wholeness tries to regain control of her life and the only way possible is to commit an extreme act. No, maybe it isn't the right choice. But unless you imagine yourself to be the quiet and compliant woman that Jason and the government want you to be, what other options do you have? It is a question without an answer.

These kind of difficult questions and impossible situations that the Greeks explored in their drama— today we find the same kind of exploration in soap operas. At first, one might roll their eyes at the thought of comparing soap operas, which are thought of as low-brow entertainment, to classic Greek tragedy. Yet they have much in common both on the surface and at their core. They both confront social taboos, they both compete for the praise of mass audiences, and they focus on families under pressure. The most significant similarity is what makes them so important to have in our canon of storytelling—and that is something that Edith Hall identifies with clarity. She argues that both forms have strong roles for women and they “don't see the home as a place of safety, with the drama happening beyond. They see the home itself as a place of danger” (Hall). We need that. We need to see the home as a place of danger. We cannot view it as a safe-haven that one must

sacrifice everything for. That is what Medea did. We know where that got her.

Andromache in *Troy Women* did the same thing. Look where that got her. The home isn't always going to protect. Theatre artists need to stage stories where home is not safe, so that the voices of abused and betrayed women will not automatically silence themselves out of propriety. Medea, and yes, soap operas, impart to us a vast spectrum of the domestic experience. They assure us that as much as we would love to be and to look like the perfect family, families are composed of human beings who are by their very nature fallible and vastly unpredictable. We are not alone in our imperfections.

Who wants to see perfection anyway? The stage is a place where flaws can be beautiful and questions can stand alone without answers. Medea's refusal to be disempowered by her divorce from Jason is inspiring, and her demand that the scales of injustice and suffering be equal between the genders is unusual and exciting. Look at the recent book made in to a movie *Eat, Pray, Love*. This woman has to take a year off of life and visit three different countries in order to come to terms with *her* divorce, not to mention meet another man. In a time when divorce seems to destroy our emotional and financial lives, a story about a woman taking it upon herself to even the scales is invigorating. When the myth was originally written this was a radical move, as Margaret Williamson points out for Medea to negotiate in such a manner, "translat(ing) herself into the role of a male citizen, operating in the public sphere as Jason's equal" (Williamson, 18). Williamson devotes the majority of her article to detailing Medea's placement of herself within the male domain and discourse. How revitalizing when we live in an age where Hillary Clinton needs to post a chocolate chip cookie recipe in order to not be demonized during Bill's presidential race and the recent Republican vice presidential candidate, Sarah

Palin, had to run around the media tooting her own maternal horn instead of offering any concrete, potentially abrasive, political commentary; and hopeful first lady Ann Romney's main selling point is her stay-at-home mom career. Medea subversively uses the male public sphere for female revenge and spits in the face of the imbalance of importance and power, demanding that her grief and Jason's grief be equal.

To oversimplify the *Medea* myth is to do grave injustice to an archetype that is a real, if scary, part of the feminine psyche. Yet many do. Each step we take towards understanding what *Medea* means for us as a society is an evolutionary step towards a community constantly bettering itself. Rhodessa Jones is one of those people delving into this with *The Medea Project*. She battles those oversimplifications with eloquence. In an interview about the project, the interviewer Al Gurnov opened by asking "Why is it called Medea? Didn't she kill her children?" She responds, "*History* says she killed her children... I think it's just that history got it wrong. I'm sure she did but I don't think it was malicious I think it might have been madness I think it might have been the ultimate act, the ultimate act of power actually." Power—how fitting when that is exactly what women are deprived of and exactly what the women in *The Medea Project* are fighting to gain.

The Medea Project is a collaborative theatre project, lead by Rhodessa Jones, with female inmates in the San Francisco county jail system. It is art for rehabilitation. It is a voice for those who are forced into silence. It is the kind of medicine that our community and culture needs. The stories these women share are ugly, unrefined, and uncomfortable to listen to. And we need to listen to them. The more we lock away these inmates and pretend they don't exist, the more overcrowded the jails become. A problem doesn't go

away just because we ignore it. Sounds elementary, doesn't it? Yet that is exactly what we are doing. Jones says that as an American culture we need to imagine the life of another into order to rehabilitate ourselves—for it is *ourselves* that need rehabilitation. The crimes the women have committed are not just a failure of an individual, but the failure of a community. She says, "If you think jail doesn't have anything to do with you, someday, just wait, a ten-year-old will be pointing an Uzi in your face" (Fraden, 2). Distancing ourselves is dangerous, and to dissociate is plain ignorant.

The nature of Jones's project harkens back to the very origins of theatre. In stating her hopes for the project she says, "In the days of antiquity, theatre included us all. It was a religious experience. I hope this project resounds back to that theatre" (Jones, 2). By giving the incarcerated a voice and opening the performances to the public the work becomes more than therapy, it becomes theatre not *just* for incarcerated women. In her book Imagining Medea, Rena Fraden has experienced the project in rehearsals and performance firsthand and claims it is "theater about why some women end up incarcerated and some do not; it is about what should connect communities and what does not connect them at present" (Fraden 2).

However, the project does not claim to be a miracle cure for incarcerated women. In *Slouching Towards Armageddon*, inmate Darcell Bernard tells the story of the day she walked with the devil. She meets a man who sells her food stamps for cash. He buys and smokes some crack and then they head to the nearby Burger King for something to eat. She is about to leave him to meet up with another friend when he forces her at gunpoint through the streets to a nearby rooftop:

He wanted me to fight him. And I did. And I got my ass kicked. He snatched my backpack. He cut my straps and tied me up. He made me suck his dick. He fucked me and then he cut my throat. He was smiling the whole mother fucking time. I can hear him going down the stairs. I jumped up and tried to untie myself. I could hear him coming back. I lay back in the puddle of blood.

And I said, "Oh god, please let this man think I'm dead. Don't let him kill me."

I could feel him staring at me and I'm scared and he walked up to me. And he pulls out his dick and then he pissed in my face. Then he turned around, he pulled down his pants and then he shit in my face.

Later in the show, all the women speak an affirmation beginning with "If I live and do not die, I hope I..." When Bernard says "have a career in fashion advertisement" someone in the audience cries out "You will!" The audience claps and cheers, perhaps hoping that vocal affirmation can translate hope into a reality. (Fraden 11)

A month after she is released, she is no longer heard from but it is reported that she is strung out on heroin.

The worst moment in Darcell Bernard's story is when the devil, holding her at gunpoint, walks her down the street and not a soul does anything about it. "No one cared, no one heard, no one looked" (Fraden, 16). On a warm day in August, there must have

many people on the street outside the Burger King. Was the neighborhood so used to violence, so intense about minding their own business for their own protection that they didn't see what was happening? Was her African American race a factor? Did people see the gun, and just not care? Answering these questions is far less important than the raising of them. There is no way to know if anyone actually saw Bernard being prodded down the street by the barrel of a gun—but the point is they should have. She was invisible. We allowed this.

Telling this story, and all the stories of incarcerated women, is a demand for social change. It reveals that we are a culture and a community that accepts this behavior and passively allows this sort of thing to happen.

In her interview with Gunrov, he asks Rhodessa Jones the following:

Every year more and more women go to jail. Did you find an answer as to why that is happening?

Women have been punished for attempting to be free. I think that women are angry-- the systems didn't work, the idea of liberation didn't work, the idea of being a good loving girl didn't work. The idea that a prince was gonna ride in on a white horse and save you, that was a lie. You met a lot of frogs out there.

This plight sounds just like Medea's, doesn't it?— the idea that a woman does everything in her power to be a good, loving wife and then has that thrown back in her face? Yes, women are angry. There is a confusing paradox between the maternal, home-making instincts and expectations and our role in the public arena. To hearken back to

Williamson's comment on Medea entering the public sphere—we are not male citizens yet we operate within their parameters while at the same time shouldering all the traditional expectations of the female. These two cannot live together in harmony—the expectations for both are too contradictory.

It's a paradox, and thus there is no answer. Maybe we love Medea so much because there are no answers—it's easy to say that no, you would not kill your children to avenge your own betrayal. It's easy to say that you wouldn't be careless enough to get pregnant, but if you did, you would just have the child and give it up for adoption. But you don't know that. You don't know what it would be like to make that choice, to be in that situation. There isn't a right or wrong answer. The only correct answer is that women *should* have the choice.

The Medea Project does not offer salvation. In fact, many of these women are not seen or heard from again, and many slip back into their own ways. Still, it's important that they have a chance to tell their stories, even if they don't solve their problems. What is even more important is that the community hears these stories—so that we can understand the why, so that we can understand the experience of those who are near us but have somehow found themselves in entirely different circumstances. If we pretend the incarcerated women have nothing to do with us, we are consenting where we should be putting our foot down and saying no. The women choose to tell their stories in the hope that the past will not be repeated. So that next time another woman is led down the street at gunpoint, as Darcell Bernard was, someone will stop and help her. This is the “me” I find

in Medea—that this mythological character can connect all women in indignance against oppression, inequality, and the silencing of a woman’s voice.

Conclusion

Articulating my Aesthetic

In summation, here is what we are working against: a technologically driven world in which most do not see the necessity of live performance. Here is how we make ourselves necessary:

Rule #1: Get rid of what's easy. For example: Let's burn all the copies of the play *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I have no problem with the *book*, as read by 5th graders, but it should not represent the Holocaust and the sickening implications that these events have about humanity. Let's replace it with Charlotte Delbo's *Who Will Carry the Word?*, an atrocity drama that recognizes the inability to portray the horrific events and instead asks the painful questions that we've all buried underneath a contempt for Nazi Germany. There is a large cast of characters in this play, and each girl dies off just as you are getting to know her. And that's the point. Though they would rather die than be in Auschwitz, where they are imprisoned, they struggle to make sure someone will be alive to tell their story. The play doesn't try to isolate the Nazi Holocaust as a specific instance. Because it isn't. Not only were Germans not the first or last to commit genocide, it wasn't even just the Germans. It was you and me. When we isolate the Nazi Holocaust as a one-time

historical event, we willingly ignore the screams of millions of others. The recent victims in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina are silenced; their story quenched because we decided that Anne Frank is more digestible than the wealth of atrocity drama that presents a glimpse at the scope of suffering.

Rule #2: Ask difficult questions. Don't give answers. There needs to be an element of reflection after a performance, a dialogue that goes beyond the superficial. Theatre needs to ask the universal questions that transcend cultural barriers, uniting us all in our cause for survival, if not happiness and comfort. It also needs to help us think outside of the little boxes we think in as a result of living in whatever community we live in. So do not spoon feed your audience. Give them a fork and a knife; let them dig in.

Rule #3: Dream big, expect little. We should strive for goals such as wider social awareness and genuine self-reflection, accepting that only little victories can be expected and often not manifested in front of our eyes. While an automatic lifestyle change cannot be expected, a theatre experience should plant a notion into the mind of its spectators that hints at a global truths or perspectives. Maybe next time they see a Middle Eastern in Muslim headgear the sight will not provoke fear. Maybe they will be miffed at, if not offended by, the next politician on television that makes a hasty generalization about Mexican immigrants.

This art of story does something that no art can do. Other art forms make statements about a culture or time period. A painting can represent an aesthetic, sculpture can show beliefs, music can show passions, but no art form can do what story does: show humanity. Done well, it erases the prejudices inherent in the 'us against them' mentality

that our politicians and religious leaders need us to believe in order to gain and maintain leadership.

Rule #4: Cut action verbs out of mission statements. Do not be so self-righteous as to impose an intended effect on audience members! Show X should accomplish this, Show Y should teach this, Show Z should achieve the effect of... and so on and so forth. Patrons attending that sort of theatre would be better off reading a textbook or going to a lecture. We are storytellers, not professors writing syllabi. There are too many variables to control. Replace that with “to ask” or “to show” or “to breathe life into.” If our art is to be important, we need to value our audience. Didactic storytelling is condescending.

Rule #5: Let New York have commercial theatre. Stop wasting time and resources doing revivals of *Hairspray*. New York can put together a touring company that could come to your city and do a much better job. *Hairspray* is a great show but I know there is talent in your community that could create something just as good if not better if you just utilize them. Not just in the pit orchestra, but really use their talents to create something new. *By the community, for the community.* Civil rights, not public relations.

Rule #6: Embrace technology as another character in the theatre world. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Caution that you do not misuse this character. Do not just use it to enhance what you've already been doing—give this character a new role, one in which it shines best: maybe it's keeping audience attention, maybe it's a new lens through which we gain perspective. We differentiate our teaching styles in the classroom now for all the various learning types—why not do it in the theatre? Present your ideas in new ways while still retaining respect for the art of storytelling. The friendship between this ancient

art form and information technology can create spectacular work. Human computer interaction has shifted to the center of how we view both ourselves and society. Don't deny it, embrace it.

Rule #7: Sometimes you should break the rules. After all, isn't that what rules are for? Some may argue that rules are there to provide structure and guidance—and yes, structure and guidance are *good* things—but art should subvert the norm. I've written the rules with that in mind, but if subverting the rules helps you create, then subvert away.

Artists in the 21st century **should be anthropologists of the human spirit**—the point of discussion for things that are not discussed. Your goals need not be epic, nor your story grand, it just has to connect the world one tiny iota of thought at a time. You should be scared. We have a heavy responsibility and a lot of work to do. It won't always be worth it. A noble cause rarely is. We will not achieve the salary of the businessperson on floor 67, cubicle 19. We won't always achieve the praise we think we deserve. But every once in a while, we will feel how incredibly valuable we are. Because our world needs us. It may not know it, but without the performing arts we will eventually become the robots that we've created.

Epilogue

Or, the Triple A Man Story

I'd like to conclude with an anecdote from a recent experience. I call this the Triple A Man Story:

I am the last to leave the building on this chilly evening in January. It's only 6:00pm, but the very first stars are beginning to peep out from the already dark sky. I lock the door behind me, ready to leave SPARC (the School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community) behind until the morning in favor of my couch, some hot tea, and the stack of reading waiting for me at home. I get in my car and turn the key. The ignition is lifeless. I try again as my eyes dart to the headlight knob, which is turned to "on" and has been since I arrived at work at 1pm. The realization of my dead car battery sinks into my stomach as that steamy mug of tea slips out of the near future.

Friends do not answer their phones and I am forced to call AAA. Ninety minutes later he arrives—Mr. Triple A man gets out of his truck, takes one look at me standing at my car and says, "I know what your problem is. You're driving a Ford." I know this man. My blue collar background was full of this kind guy who loves this kind of half silly, half condescending, but ultimately kind of harmless banter.

I smile and say, “well yeah that, and also the battery is dead.” He gives a short, gruff laugh and pops the hood. As he is hooking up the jumper cables he makes small talk:

“So why did you come all the way from North Carolina to take dance classes?” I am confused at first, but then I remember my North Carolina license plate and the fact that we are in the parking lot of a performing arts school.

“Well, actually, I’m a teacher.”

“You’re a dance teacher?”

“I teach acting.”

“Oh, well, what kinda acting?”

“What kind?”

“Yeah, I mean, I know there is different kinds of acting, right? So, what kind do you teach?”

I’m not sure if I should tell him that while I enjoy the outside-in approach of Michael Chekov, I do think there is some validity in some aspects of the psychological method of Strasberg, thus my training method couples the two of them with some exercises from Anne Bogart and some Meisner thrown in here and there. I’m tired, cold, and not up to explaining what all that means. And then I remember a simpler explanation: “Well, one of the classes I teach is Comedy Improv.”

“Oh comedy! Like slapstick?”

“Yeah, kind of like slapstick.” Why not?

“Why did you come all the way to Virginia to teach slapstick?”

“I came for the graduate program in theatre at VCU.”

“Huh. Well tell me this: Why do you come all this way and spend all your time on what is considered to be a dying art form?”

The man has insulted my career and passion, and yet I can't help but smile. I've been attacked for my career choice before, but “dying art form” is a new one. “I don't think it's a dying art form,” I reply. “We use it in different ways now. We use performing arts training here to help children become better communicators, and we use it for therapy, and for a better cultural awareness...” I've lost him.

“So how is slapstick a kind of therapy?”

I tell him that laughter is the best therapy, and he goes on to tell me that Jeff Foxworthy and Larry the Cable Guy are what real comedy is. He jumps my car battery and leaves.

A dying art form, huh? Mr. Triple A man—I'm not going to shove theatre down your throat. I'll probably never see you again anyway. I do know a couple things for sure, though. Without theatre, without this ancient art of storytelling helping us to understand our experiences, we lose our humanity. Without automobiles, we would get more exercise and emit less carbon. People are realizing this, buying bicycles and using public transportation. Me, I traded the Ford for a Scooter (which, in case of a dead battery, I can jump start myself). Who is spending all their time in a dying industry *now*, Mr. Triple A Man?

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Vita

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