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Writing Memory with Our Bodies: Explorations in Student-Devised Theatre

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Presentation Title:

“Writing Memory with Our Bodies: Explorations in Student-Devised Theatre”

Abstract:

In Autumn Semester 2013, I gathered five undergraduate students together to make a devised theatre project in order to study the process for my graduate thesis. Devised Theatre is a method of creating a play with no pre-written script: to improvise and create with a group of people using each performer’s skills to the collective advantage. These students had not worked in this manner before, and I was curious to see if a successful performance could come out of this working method even with no prior experience. All of these students had only received traditional training; using plays with pre-written scripts to make meaning on stage.

Over the course of eight weeks, all five students came together as a group and successfully created a play out of their individual memories; re-embodied through physical improvisations into a collaboratively created play. This devised theatre piece, named *Memory Play*, was successfully performed for an audience on Monday, December 9th 2013. During the creation period, I documented and facilitated our meetings and rehearsals, introducing or discussing methods of physical improvisation and devised theatre dramaturgy designed to free the individual’s creative impulses and guide each performer/creator’s vision into a whole. As a group, we discovered simple techniques of story telling through our bodies, which we then used in various ways to bring context and dimension to our concepts.

As our work progressed, I found that the remarkable aspect of this collaboration is the scope to which these methods can be applied; my research into these techniques has uncovered similar methods in various artistic and community-oriented uses across the globe. With this in mind, I believe the methods specifically created and used by my team can also be used to help students of all ages make theatre; opening opportunities for expression and empowering individual voices in our youth communities. Such techniques can also assist non-actors with making public performances about community issues; a method of play making that is known as “Applied Theatre.”

My presentation will outline the concepts and techniques that create devised and applied theatre performances in general and this performance in particular, and present the methods our group used to create the trust and skill-sharing required in order to make a play through the body in the moment rather than write a script on a page beforehand. My presentation will also distinguish devised performance from what is recognized as dance, and elucidate how a body-oriented approach to “writing” theatre can enfranchise the performer and enrich the experience of a play for an audience. My aim in presenting this subject matter through a mixture of pre-written research and demonstrated performance technique is to engage my conference audience in the same fashion as devised theatre, thus providing those attending with new ideas of how live performances can be made, and what they can be made from.