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ON/OWN PRACTICE

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Performance, revelation and resistance: Interweaving the artistic and the therapeutic in devised theatre

ABSTRACT

This article describes the process that led to the creation of Positively Shameless, a devised theatre performance that explores emotional and physical residues of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) in five adult women in Bangalore, India. The article touches upon the interplay between the therapeutic and artistic perspectives of theatre making and challenges the widely held dichotomy between applied and pure theatre. It also explains the principles that guided the process, with illustrative examples taken from the devising stage and the final piece.

KEYWORDS

devised theatre
India
childhood sexual abuse
drama therapy
collaborative process
performative

Positively Shameless is a theatre performance that explores emotional and physical residues of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) in adult women. The traumas caused by CSA persist well into adulthood and impact many aspects of day-to-day life including one's relationship with one's self, one's body and others. The five players in *Positively Shameless* were women, all untrained actors, who had experienced CSA and chose to be a part of this project for both personal and social reasons. It was co-directed by Maitri Gopalakrishna, a drama therapist, and Shabari Rao, a dance maker and educator.

Positively Shameless opened to the public in Bangalore (India) in September 2016. The opening run of the play was completely sold out. It has since received critical interest from the theatre, mental health and social change/advocacy communities. The performance and the process of creating it was a therapeutic way for the five women to work through their trauma histories and to create an insightful piece of devised theatre. *Positively Shameless* is unique because it holds onto both therapeutic and artistic goals simultaneously thereby challenging the widely held dichotomy between applied and pure theatre. This article describes the creation of *Positively Shameless* by articulating the principles that guided the process with illustrative examples.

In 2015, Gopalakrishna, as part of her Ph.D. work with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, ran a series of drama therapy workshop sessions for adult women who had experienced CSA. Following the completion of the group therapy sessions, creating a performance piece, that integrated the therapeutic process for the women who participated in the workshop, became a compelling possibility for two main reasons. First, the painful residues of CSA and their personal struggles were largely caused by sociopolitical issues such as conventional gender positions in Indian society and patriarchal values on the place of women. Keeping these residues within the closed space of therapy sessions, therefore, seemed limiting to the process of bringing social awareness about the issue discussed here. Second, the belief that artistic and therapeutic goals are not mutually exclusive. Developing a process that would enable the coming together of the artistic and the therapeutic in a group context was, therefore, highly relevant.

It was clear that this new phase required a very different kind of engagement from both the participants and the directors of the performance. The participants had to be able to look at their painful experiences as artistic material that would get played with and eventually performed. They had to allow transparency of their protective layers and had to 'perform' to audiences. After much exploration, five participants entered the next phase of the project as 'players'. Gopalakrishna's transition involved moving from the role of therapist to therapist-director. Further, the project needed another directorial voice – one that was not coloured by the therapist role. Thus, Rao joined the team and brought her experience of working with and through the body.

WORKING WITH CURRENT LIVE MATERIAL

Perhaps the most significant principle that guided this process was our choice to work with material that was current for the players, that is, material that they were working on and might choose to address in their therapy sessions. This choice served both the therapeutic intent of the process and also became a pivotal aesthetic choice that set this work apart from other autobiographical theatre and perhaps closer to the realm of Self Revelatory Theatre. However, the danger with such intimate narratives is that performances can become

overwhelming for players and audiences alike. In order to avoid this, we drew upon the principle of 'aesthetic distance' (Emunah 1994, 2015; Landy 1986) where one is neither emotionally overwhelmed nor over-distanced. It is at this point that internal reflection, change and integration can occur. We employed several theatrical and therapeutic devices that would help emotional distancing for players and audiences alike. We also discovered that drawing from these two paradigms (theatre and therapy) in an iterative fashion allowed for the development of a rich and complex performance.

L, for instance, had worked on her CSA history for several years in individual therapy. We encouraged her to find something that is still current and unresolved. For her, it was the loss of dance. She had been an avid dancer until thirteen, and then one day she stopped and had never danced since. We created a scene of the events that followed that final dance performance as L remembered them – teenage jubilation at a successful performance that was abruptly shattered by her mother, who told her that she had put her body on display for all the men in the audience including 'him' (who abused her). In L's young mind, there was no option but to give up dance. Through the play, other players' stories found their way into L's narrative so that six scenes later, she is able to get her *ghungroos* (anklets) out of the box and dance again for the first time in 28 years!

T could not write a story about her conflicted relationship with her parents for a rehearsal. When asked the reason for this, she broke down. Curling her body into a foetal position, she said tearfully that writing about her father, she felt, would be a betrayal (father was not the abuser in this case anyway). That rehearsal we processed her relationship with her father through a therapeutic intervention that untangled her emotions. A few rehearsals on we developed a scene that built on the process of the emotional untangling. The scene communicated a complex father–daughter relationship even though the father was not the perpetrator of the abuse. T then re-authored the relationship into one that was supportive for her in her present life.

When exploring the players' relationships with sex, a central aspect of CSA, the cultural silence around sexual act in India became apparent to us. The complexities with regard to sex in the context of CSA can be intense. We had to find the right device that allowed us to address the complexities without making such cultural responses overwhelming or trivial. One of the residues of CSA experienced by all the players in their present lives was a tendency to dissociate during sex: 'I feel like I am outside my body and observing the scene', T said. We decided to frame the sexual act as a sporting event with commentators and coaches, humorously showing how crowded it was in the bedroom.

COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF CREATION

Another principle that guided the process of creating the play was ensuring that it was a non-hierarchical and collaborative project. Acknowledging and disrupting the power dynamics, while striving for participatory decision-making, without exerting our directorial position was a key in our collaborative process. Themes or ideas would come up. As a group, we would tease them apart both in discussion and through improvisation to find elements that were significant for the players and held performative potential. Each of these elements was then collaboratively devised and scripted. Discussions and negotiations took place seamlessly through many channels: face-to-face,



Figure 1: Players and directors on stage together during the post-show discussion.

e-mail, WhatsApp and Google Drive documents (where drafts of scripts were edited and commented upon by all). No individual, neither player nor director, had a final say. What finally made it into the performance got there through a long process of negotiation that involved being open and trusting of the group. We realized that in order to facilitate a truly non-hierarchical, collaborative process, we had to allow for time and space between generating a theme and finalizing a scene (Figure 1).

In one of our rehearsals, X shared a story where her father, who was also the perpetrator of the abuse, came over to stay at her house. The story powerfully illustrated the complexities of this relationship. The group felt instantly that it had to be in the final performance just as it was. A week or two passed and X said that she felt uncomfortable with performing the story because she was currently rebuilding her relationship with her father and did not want the story in the public sphere. While she did have complete jurisdiction over her material, the story was extremely powerful in itself. The group offered her the option of keeping the story without linking it to her specifically. This was acceptable to X. We came up with a theatrical form that did not compromise the needs of X – telling the story as a chorus in a stylized fashion. A new script and choreography was created and X reworked it until we had a scene.

CRAFTED DISCLOSURE IN PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

As a play to be performed in public, we had to address issues of disclosure at multiple levels. The first level of disclosure was that of the players publicly revealing themselves as women with a history of CSA. Some of the players



Figure 2: After disclosing her abuse, a young girl is forced to silence herself and comfort her hysterical mother.

had not yet disclosed this to their children, families and friends. Deciding to disclose themselves as having experienced CSA could have real-life consequences. In the Indian context in particular, speaking about CSA is taboo and those who do are often labelled as 'shameless'. The title, *Positively Shameless*, reclaimed shamelessness as an act of personal and social resistance – a way of 'the victim' refusing to hold on to the shame anymore. The second level of disclosure was the range of responses – from ignoring/silencing, to trivializing and blaming – that players had received when they had disclosed their history of CSA in the past to their friends or family members. The social taboo along with the past experiences meant that any disclosure in the play had to be skilfully crafted. This led to the third level of disclosure: revealing specific details of CSA experiences to the audience.

Four vignettes occur on different parts of the stage. Each reveals a true disclosure experience, the impact of which is shown as a closing image to each vignette. A client talking about the abuse to her therapist, only to be given a flower extract remedy to improve her self-confidence. A young girl having to comfort her hysterical mother. A 'moral' husband 'accepting' his 'tainted' wife so long as she never sees her family again. A teenage daughter reminding her mother of abuse in the past only to be ignored, yet again (Figure 2).

Towards the end of the play, R breaks the fourth wall, directly asking the audience: 'What is it going to be with you? How are you seeing me? Are we separate? Me as player and you as audience? Or do you see parts of yourself in us?' This scene directly dealt with the impact of disclosure and the very real risk that the players had taken in performing their real stories.



Figure 3: A moment from the 'Positively Shameless Dance'.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE BODY IN PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

In the context of CSA, the body is the site of violation – a site of sexual violence and interrogation. The impact of this kind of violation is profound and is manifested in several ways including feeling dirty and ashamed about one's body, keeping the body hidden and under wraps and ignoring or being unable to respond to the messages of the body. It was important for us to recognize the body as an integral part of the processing and the performative toolkit. This commitment to an embodied approach had a tangible impact on both the process and the performance and indeed the players' own relationships with their bodies.

Moving without inhibition, in unchoreographed but powerful synchrony, all five players do the 'Positively Shameless Dance' towards the end of the play. This was an important moment because, in that moment, the players are swept up by rhythm, music and dance together without being concerned about how their bodies were being perceived. Getting to a place where the players were able to dance freely, without the safety of set choreography, took practice – not of dancing but of becoming comfortable with one's body (Figure 3).

In another scene, P deals more directly with her own sense of shame associated with her body. She begins by opening a box, in which she had confined the part of herself that revelled in the pleasures of the body. She opens the box and revisits that part of herself but immediately the sense of shame, being dirty, needy and insecure come flooding back. She then wonders, with the rest of the players, if there is a way of being able to embrace the pleasures of the body without shame and if she is ready for that yet.

At various points, we were asked what the primary goal was: theatre or therapy? It was challenging for us to not get pulled into that dichotomy and

to hold on to our stated aim: to create a piece of theatre that was both therapeutically and artistically rigorous and relevant. After three successful shows, we were inundated by offers for further performances by theatre festivals, CSA advocacy organizations and mental health institutions. However, before going forward, we needed to consider the questions: does a piece based on current-live material lose its relevance when performed multiple times, over several months, at different venues? Would we be running the ethical risk of treating painful personal narratives as 'entertainment' pieces?

For *Positively Shameless*, reworking the piece seems inevitable. One option is to replace aspects of the play that are now resolved with as yet unresolved issues for the players at this time. Another option would be to replace the therapeutic aim of the performance with a social/educational/advocacy aim. This would mean changing the tone and emphasis of the piece dramatically. We wonder if there is a third option that sits somewhere between these two. Is there a way to draw out the socio-political discourses implied in the personal transformations, such that we are able to make the focus of therapy more socially located? This exciting prospect will define our route map from here on: one that will help us navigate our way to yet another artistically rigorous and socially therapeutic version of *Positively Shameless*.

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Maitri Gopalakrishna has a master's degree in Drama Therapy from the California Institute from Integral Studies, San Francisco. She is currently working on a Ph.D. from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She also works as a drama therapist in Bangalore, with individuals and groups in clinical and non-clinical settings. Maitri's theatre training began informally at the age of 12 with the Artists' Repertory Theatre, Bangalore. She later studied theatre at University College Utrecht (The Netherlands) and University of California, Berkeley where she studied acting, directing, community theatre, stagecraft and light design. She lived and worked with the Kattaikkuttu Sangam in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu for one year, where she developed an understanding and appreciation for Tamizh folk theatre. She is also a trained practitioner of Theatre of the Oppressed, Playback theatre and a Carnatic singer. Her artistic practice in the last eight years has largely involved designing and facilitating Drama Therapy groups that often incorporate performative sharings. This project marks a new endeavour that attempts to close the gap between therapeutic and theatrical work.

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Shabari Rao is a dance maker, educator and researcher with over fifteen years of professional experience. She began her professional journey in dance under (late) Guru Maya Rao with a BA in Kathak and Choreography. She later went on to get a Professional Diploma in Dance Studies from Trinity Laban Conservatoire for Music and Dance (UK). Since then she has taught, performed and choreographed extensively both in India, and internationally. She has added depth and breath to her practice by participating in several artist residencies including the International Summer Program at the Watermill Center (New York), and Bodystorming Hits Bangalore at the National Center for Biological Sciences (Bangalore). She holds a MA in Dance and Education from the Royal Academy of Dance, Faculty of Education (UK). She consults with education and arts institutions across India and is part-time faculty at Srishti Institute of Art Design and Technology, where her research focuses on the intersection of body, art making and learning.

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