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THE ART OF APPLYING REFLECTION: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF REFLEXIVE
TEACHING ARTISTRY AND PERSONAL PRAXIS

by

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B.A. Michigan State University, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Teaching Artists (that is, artists who teach) are in a constant state of reflection and self-evaluation. Reflexive Teaching Artistry is the ability to apply personal reflection to practice as a means to better support and engage students. Reflection is certainly useful at the culmination of a class or project, but how does reflecting throughout the creative process benefit participants? How can a Teaching Artist's reflections be applied to their practice throughout a creative process to better serve the objectives of a program? Using the lens of Reflexive Teaching Artistry, this thesis examines three unique drama-based projects and the instances of “in-the-moment” reflection that challenged original project curriculum or infrastructure. The projects discussed include intergenerational program *Come to the Table*, the Multimodal Performing Arts Intervention (MPAI) arts and wellness research study, and a performance of *When Pigs Fly*, a Theatre for the Very Young piece, as performed for an audience with memory loss.

To my mother, Wendy, who is always right.

To my Handy-Dandy Grandpa, who I think would have loved this journey.

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At the foundation of this thesis is collaboration, and there are so many people who played an integral part in its formation:

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My TYA cohort, Ralph Gregory Krumins, Brittany Caine, Scott Savage and Bianca Alamo. I look forward to changing the world alongside you, friends.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Since the age of twelve, theatre has played an immense role in my life. As an adolescent, I performed in plays and musicals at school and in my community. I surrounded myself with people who were passionate about the performing arts and creative expression. While I may not have been aware of it at the time, theatre became a critical element of my identity and a means for me to gain confidence, develop core values, and hone a sense of artistry. It wasn't much of a surprise that the next step in life for me included working to receive my BFA in Theatre from Michigan State University, followed by a move to New York to pursue a career as a professional actor. The compromises of that specific lifestyle, however, were more than I was willing to offer, and I soon thereafter transitioned into a contrasting career in the wine industry.

Several years after jumping headfirst into hospitality, I had scheduled a vacation to Orlando to visit friends who worked at Walt Disney World. While I anticipated a sunny, relaxing visit with my favorite people, what I did not expect was a visceral emotional reaction to watching children engaging with the creative programming at Disney. At one point on the trip, I found myself standing in front of Cinderella's castle in Magic Kingdom, weeping as a street parade swept by and performers leapt off of floats and began inviting children to dance and play. There was magic in watching young people express themselves through movement and song, without hesitation or embarrassment, and it triggered within me something I didn't know I had been missing over the course of the past several years.

The emotional reaction I'd had on that trip made me question everything about my path in life and what I was meant to be doing. While I had needed a career adjustment after my time in New York, there was a void in my spirit that theatre had once filled and was now aching for

attention. I no longer felt the need, however, to be performing. Instead, I had identified a newfound drive to find ways to present young people with opportunities to engage with the performing arts. After all, theatre had been undeniably critical to my emotional, creative, and social development as a young person. I knew it was my turn to give other young people access to similar opportunities that had formatively shaped me as a person.

The field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) was fairly unknown to me at the time. It is a broad categorization of theatre created for – and sometimes with – children, that encompasses other areas including arts integration and theatre education. TYA can be found in designated youth and family theatres, education departments in non-TYA designated theatres, and schools across the world. Renowned organizations such as TYA/USA and the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) are dedicated to the quality and accessibility of TYA, as are international organizations such as ASSITEJ, the International Association of Theatre of Children and Young People. The worldwide community dedicated to bringing theatre to young people thrives on passion and dedication; little did I know I was about to become a devoted ambassador and practitioner of TYA.

Just over a year after my first visit to Walt Disney World, I had moved to Orlando, Florida to pursue my MFA in Theatre with a focus in TYA at the University of Central Florida (UCF). The program's partnership with the Orlando Repertory Theatre (Orlando REP), a professional family theatre, was what had initially drawn me to UCF. I had every intention of pursuing a career in administration or development for a children's theatre; I'd had little experience in my life working with children and the idea of directing or teaching them pushed me drastically out of my comfort zone. That's the wonderful thing about grad school, however – whether you like it or not, boundaries will be tested.

It didn't take long for me to realize that the best part about working in the field of TYA was actually working *with* young people. In my role as a Teaching Artist, I found the most enjoyment while in a classroom facilitating a residency with students or teaching creative drama with preschoolers at Orlando REP on the weekends. I felt the most creatively stimulated and challenged when I was with young people, honing my skills as a practitioner and testing new methodologies and ideas in a safe space. Input and feedback from participants pushed me to reevaluate my classroom strategies and find new ways to encourage and challenge students. I found myself communicating more thoughtfully and spending time in a practically constant state of reflection on my practice. The most productive growth that I experienced as an artist, a practitioner, and a human being came from my interactions with young people.

Whether I am teaching for a professional theatre, facilitating as a guest in a school classroom, or even directing a production, my role as Teaching Artist means I am constantly learning, reflecting, and growing. Teaching Artistry, however, isn't just about teaching theatre; it is about networking and sustaining a community that recognizes and advocates for the search for more creative and effective means of learning. It is about helping people – particularly young people – find their voices in a world where it is easy to feel voiceless. It is about encouraging individuals to take agency in their artistry and pride in their work. It is also about being as willing and excited to be a student as you are to teach. Teaching Artist is a title I wear with pride.

This thesis is an exploration of what it means to grow as a Teaching Artist. I will be analyzing several of my personal favorite projects over the last few years in order to identify the ways in which I have become – and continue to become - a stronger Teaching Artist. Additionally, the three projects discussed in the following chapters all have one major commonality; they all included senior citizen participants. Though the focus of my graduate

program is Theatre for *Young* Audiences, I have been grateful enough to have had opportunities that allowed me to work alongside older generations as well. The experience I have had as a Teaching Artist for young people, however, has only strengthened my ability to work with seniors, and there are many skills and methodologies I have learned while studying TYA that have undoubtedly benefitted me and my participants in the projects I will be reflecting upon in this document.

In order to grow as a Teaching Artist, you have to be open to a constant state of reflection; we learn best from our own experience and an open-mindedness to evolve and practice flexible teaching. In their book *The Reflexive Teaching Artist*, Kathryn Dawson and Daniel A. Kelin present the theory of Reflexive Teaching, which is the application of reflection to practice. Reflexive Teaching has become a critical part of my development as a Teaching Artist, and undeniably lent to the success of the three projects I will be exploring. There is an inherent vulnerability to sharing personal reflections, but I truly believe that it is the acknowledgement of challenges, mistakes, and even moments of accomplishment that turn reflecting from something that may be laced in embarrassment into a learning opportunity worth sharing. It is my hope that the following reflexive analyses encourage others to pay closer attention to their own reflections and strengthen their confidence in themselves as Teaching Artists, arts advocates, and human beings.

Teaching Artistry

The term “Teaching Artist” is relatively new to the world of arts education. In their book *The Reflexive Teaching Artist*, Kathryn Dawson and Daniel A. Kelin define “Teaching Artist” as “Artists who teach. Teaching with great artistry. Teaching about art or through art or using art to teach, explore and/or reflect on nonart topics...Teaching artfully. Art-inspired teaching. Artful

teaching” (Dawson 5-6). This thorough – and interpretive – definition accentuates the balance between the most important facets of the title: pedagogy and artistry. Similarly, author and arts educator Eric Booth defines a Teaching Artist as “a practicing artist who develops the complementary skills, curiosities, and habits of mind of an educator, who can effectively engage a wide range of participants in learning experiences in, through, and about the arts” (Booth). There are currently no specific qualifications to earn the title of Teaching Artist, but rather an understood and shared mission to teach skills, school standards, and empathy through the arts. Though not specified in either definition, Teaching Artists believe in the power of the arts and the critical importance of their accessibility. They may work in residence with a theatre or school or shift between freelance teaching gigs. It is a job that requires flexibility, passion, and dedication. Teaching Artists are fierce advocates for the arts and arts-based education.

To be a Teaching Artist is to embrace the often-vulnerable process of reflection. Reflection ensures quality in practice. When it comes to reflection in Teaching Artistry, Dawson and Kelin share, “Reflection permeates an artist’s work. From an initial imaginative spark of inspiration, to the deliberate choice of interpretation and purpose, to the ongoing desire for revision and rethinking, to the final decision of completion, to the reception of the experience or the work – reflection feeds each choice in the artistic process” (Dawson 27). Teaching Artists not only have the power to reflect upon their own practice, but also to provide their students with the encouragement to reflect upon their own creative processes. Personal reflection provides individuals with agency and pride in their own work, as well as the ability to grow from their unique challenges and successes. As important as it is for the Teaching Artist to be constantly evaluating their own facilitation and creation, it is just as critical for them to coach their students to develop and apply their own reflective skills.

I have been lucky enough to work as a Teaching Artist for the past three years in a variety of capacities and for several Central Florida theatrical organizations. Since the first time I stepped into role as a Teaching Artist, I have found myself in a constant state of reflection, frequently questioning how I can learn from my practice and apply my reflections to future curriculums and facilitations. Without a keen sense of retrospective analysis, my practice would never evolve, and my methodologies would grow stagnant and outdated. I have learned that both teaching and art are deeply rooted in connectivity and unless you are constantly reflecting on how your participants connect to both you and the content you teach, you will be hard-pressed to find success in engaging students. What works well for one collective of participants may not for the next; it is reflection that allows us to grow and better suit the needs of each group individually.

Taking reflective teaching artistry to the next level is the concept of *reflexive* teaching. Reflexive teaching is the application of reflection to practice, as well as an in-depth evaluation of how individual core values and beliefs may influence how, what, and whom we teach. In their book, Dawson and Kelin elaborate,

Reflexivity is introspection, which demands a more intense scrutiny than reflection as well as willingness to revise, update, or even upend personal beliefs and assumptions. Reflexive thought invites us to closely consider what informs who we are as individuals. Reflexive thought invites us to critically examine how beliefs and values, actions and attitudes, our very intuitions shape choice, influence collaborators and students, and significantly influence the results of our and our students' experiences. The reflexive individual entertains what *could be* and even considers *what challenges all that I have known, believed, or practiced*. (Dawson 30)

Therefore, the reflexive Teaching Artist not only takes into account previous personal reflections, but also explores external influences and the ways in which how we internalize and compartmentalize these influences affects us as individuals, and thus affects us as Teaching

Artists. A reflexive Teaching Artist is vigilantly aware of the world and the ways in which the world affects our perspectives as individuals and members of our community.

A reflexive Teaching Artist invests time in learning both about their community – or the community in which they will be teaching and their role within it. Sensitive acknowledgements such as privilege must be taken into account in order to successfully initiate reflexive practice, and the discomfort that can come from these self-identifications is often fuel for curating curriculum and creating programming individual to the needs of the community into which you are entering. A reflexive Teaching Artist understands that moments of discomfort are the inspiration for change and growth and that the most successful moments in teaching can often grow from uncomfortable circumstances.

As a Teaching Artist, I am constantly aware of my position within my own community. As a white, female, affluent, English-speaking graduate student, my life experiences are often quite different from those of the diverse student bodies I often find myself prepared to teach. My differences do not necessarily make me incapable of teaching them, however; rather, it is my awareness that allows me the room to grow from my experiences, learn from my mistakes, and adapt to further meet the needs of the individuals whom I teach. The Teaching Artist I am now is different than the Teaching Artist I was upon beginning grad school, or even the Teaching Artist I was a month ago. The application of my reflexive processing is what allows me to constantly evolve as a practitioner.

Beyond using reflection and introspection to develop a successful practice, a Teaching Artist should also focus on the creation of a meaningful *praxis*. Praxis is the product of reflexive teaching. It is the utilization of reflection in facilitation. Dawson and Kelin further explain praxis as “an ongoing, reiterative cycle of reflection and action that moves the individual toward a new

critical awareness. It *is* about what one does; but also, why one does it, and how choices reference and impact large systems of power and the people/policies/structures within them” (Dawson 215). A Teaching Artist has to be constantly aware of the ways in which their facilitation is being received and be willing to adapt to the needs of the participants. Praxis references the Teaching Artist’s ability to reflect and adapt efficiently without sacrificing either art or education; it is the living organism practice becomes when endowed with reflection.

As a Teaching Artist, I have often found that the facilitation of a lesson or rehearsal outlined on paper requires in-the-moment adaptation to better suit the needs of participants, environment, or even fellow facilitators. This flexibility is invaluable when teaching and making an effort to coordinate the most organic and effective outcome of a class, rehearsal, or program. Dawson and Kelin define these in-the-moment applications of reflection as *critical junctures*. They explain, “Critical junctures are moments where process takes a natural pause. It is a moment defined by a shift in activity, approach, tone or goal during the artistic process. This type of mid-work reflection can occur just with the facilitator – as she mentally considers her next question in response to a dramatic learning moment – as well as in dialogue with the full group so all participants can fully engage in the reflective process that determines the next step” (Dawson 217). It is these critical junctures that give life to praxis; without them, praxis would be only practice. Dawson and Kelin’s defining of critical juncture allowed me to identify these important in-the-moment reflections and to be more present in my own practice, ultimately developing a more attentive and intentional praxis.

The process of developing a successful praxis begins in the early stages of planning and continues beyond the culmination of the residency or performance. Dawson and Kelin elaborate, “The reflective Teaching Artist ideally activates praxis throughout an artistic process. He reflects

on intention *before* a new practice while being sure to reflect after critical junctures *within* practice to better determine the next action and at the *end* of practice to synthesize and connect the learning both in and through the art form to larger questions in the world” (Dawson 217). Beyond the individual event, reflections from one creative process will consistently inform future practices and curriculums. A Teaching Artist’s praxis is never stagnant; it is constantly shifting and adjusting.

In an effort to hold myself accountable to the standards of Dawson and Kelin’s definition of praxis, I find myself reflecting more consistently throughout my creative processes and conscientiously applying my reflections to my teaching in-the-moment. Because of this methodology, I continue to grow as a Teaching Artist and have developed a set of core values that drive me to be a stronger teacher, a better artist, and a more compassionate individual. One of these values is my belief in importance of creating a safe and welcoming learning environment where participants feel supported in letting go of artistic inhibitions and following their creative instincts. The best moments of creativity and empathy come from a sense of security in the classroom, and students that feel safe around one another can support each other’s growth, celebrate successes, and provide meaningful peer feedback. I also firmly believe in the balance between product and process; I recognize the importance of creating a polished theatrical product in which an ensemble can take pride while I also celebrate a curated artistic process that fosters engagement and excitement. Additionally, I aim to create pieces, be they shows or curriculums, that honor both the creative participants and the audience, taking into account the needs and desires of both individuals and the communities they serve. These values motivate my intentions as I create programs, curriculums, and stories to share with others and live at the heart of everything I do as a Teaching Artist.

While there have been a variety of programs, classes, and residencies I have been grateful to teach over the last three years, there are several with an intergenerational theme that have been the closest to my heart. This thesis will explore three individual projects through the lens of praxis, utilizing practice as research. Each program will have a chapter dedicated to its design and facilitation featuring three individual critical junctures from my personal reflection. These selected moments proved pivotal to the development of each project, often changing the trajectory of the curriculum or finished product. It is my hope that by identifying these critical junctures, one can identify the ways in which the active application of reflection to practice can benefit a program, the Teaching Artist, and the students involved.

The first chapter will feature *Come to the Table*, an intergenerational program that connected middle schoolers and senior residents at a retirement community with the theme of food and family recipes. The second chapter highlights the Multimodal Performing Arts Intervention (MPAI) in partnership with the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts and Advent Health, a project that aimed to relieve stress and increase quality of life for caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia through the use of improvisation and drama-based activities. The third chapter will explore crack an egg TVY's initiative to bring the original Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) piece *When Pigs Fly* to Encore at Avalon Retirement Community to be performed for residents of their memory unit. All three projects fostered moments of critical juncture and personal growth throughout the course of their facilitation, several of which will be explored in each chapter.

There are several questions I hope to address throughout this thesis. The first is, how do we become stronger Teaching Artists when we allow moments of critical juncture to influence our practice? By reflecting upon several of my own selected critical junctures, I hope to utilize

my own growth as a practitioner as a case study in the challenges and successes of developing an effective praxis. Other questions include, how do critical junctures from one project or program influence the next? How does one navigate the muddy waters of teaching *and* maintaining agency in individual artistry as a Teaching Artist? How does privilege play into practice, and how can an understanding of one's own privilege benefit or challenge my teaching and, therefore, praxis? How do my own values as a Teaching Artist impact both my curriculum design and facilitation?

Praxis is unique to each individual practitioner. Critical junctures constantly shift values and practice; it is the responsibility of a Teaching Artist to learn from these moments of external and introspective influence, embracing growth and applying new ideas, theories, and methodologies to their work. The following chapters are only an excerpt of my journey as a Teaching Artist, though they reflect so many of my own moments of evolution as a practitioner and educator. It is the ultimate reflection of my work, and my goal is to further analyze specific personal critical junctures to explore the importance of reflexive teaching artistry.

CHAPTER TWO: COME TO THE TABLE

There is an inarguable need in today's society for intergenerational programming. As technology quickly advances, it drives a wedge between older and younger generations, creating a rift in communication and understanding. Younger people embrace and adapt to new trends, while older citizens often settle into what is routine and comfortable. Not to mention that the inevitable physical and mental decay that comes with old age is an uncomfortable thing to confront as a young person lost in the façade of immortality. But the memories and moments of connectivity that come from intergenerational interaction can help bridge gaps and stimulate important conversation about life as it is and life as it was.

The intergenerational project *Come to the Table* was born during a car ride with my mentor and Community Engagement Director at the Orlando Repertory Theatre (Orlando REP), Emily Freeman. We were discussing future residencies and workshops when I brought up a video I had seen on Facebook earlier that morning of a daycare center in London that was inside of a nursing home, allowing for daily interaction between young children and seniors. The viral video was cheerful and heartwarming, emphasizing the impact that the toddlers had on the seniors' as they participated together in daily activities such as exercise and music-making. In interviews throughout the video, seniors expressed their gratitude for the children's visits and the positive impact that the children's recognition of the seniors as individuals had on their spirits. It was unlike anything I had been exposed to in my career, and I was profoundly moved by the short video. Immediately, Emily and I were excitedly discussing the potential for an intergenerational drama program in Orlando. We began brainstorming community resources and partnerships who might be interested in participating. We debated the pros and cons of having

various ages of students engaged in the project. We discussed the differences of conducting a program involving preschoolers versus one working with high schoolers. While we knew we were wholeheartedly embracing the intergenerational aspect of the idea, we weren't yet sure which student age group we would be engaging.

During our car trip, we also conceived a theme for the program; food and recipes, the ultimate catalyst for conversation and building new relationships. Food is a basic necessity for every human being regardless of age, and it is something that is inherently infused with culture, tradition, and heritage. Not to mention that often, when we think of sharing or passing down recipes, the exchange is generational, passed down from grandparent to parent to child. Cuisines can be unique to a region, lifestyle, or even a specific family, and when we share food, we learn about the people with whom we share, and find ourselves a little bit closer after enjoying a meal. Food also physically brings us together, uniting people around a table and anchoring our presence to those in our company. In terms of our budding theatre project, food seemed like the perfect theme to connect multiple generations and would allow our young people to take just as much agency in the conversation as the seniors. By the time we had reached our destination in the car, it had been decided; our new project would be about sharing food and family traditions between generations – we only had to find the right people to participate.

Since *Come to the Table* was a new and thus relatively unpredictable project, it was important to ensure that our community partners were flexible and willing to commit to a brand-new program. One of my closest friends from my time as an undergraduate at Michigan State University, Krista Traver, has been teaching middle school drama at Avalon Middle School (AMS) in Avalon Park, a town located in eastern Orlando, Florida, for several years. Krista had willingly welcomed me into her classroom on numerous other occasions to facilitate residencies

and workshops with her students, and she was equally open-minded about participating in *Come to the Table*. AMS is lucky enough to have a thriving theatre program and a collective of supportive families who are willing to invest time and resources into the success of the students' theatrical experiences. Established by Avalon Park Group in the 1990s, the town of Avalon Park is a particularly new and affluent community. Avalon Park is also home to Encore at Avalon Retirement Community (Encore), an assisted living facility which, according to their website, emphasizes the importance of "companionship within a community." Encore's proximity to AMS was ideal for visits with students, and AMS had a preestablished relationship with Encore through their acclaimed Songbird program, which brought middle school students to Encore to share music and perform for individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia in Encore's memory unit. Emily and I thought it might behoove us to capitalize on the AMS/Encore partnership for *Come to the Table* as well, reinforcing the strong community ties at the core of Avalon Park Group's mission to "change the way the world lives, learns, works and plays through creating healthy sustainable communities and every aspect thereof." When we reached out to Encore in regard to participation in *Come to the Table*, Encore embraced us enthusiastically. With our two community partners in place, *Come to the Table* was in motion.

For the purposes of *Come to the Table*, it was agreed that I would take on several roles within the program. Firstly, I would work with Emily as a co-creator and program designer, coordinating our visits to Encore, structuring the interview process and preparing students for the experience, and creating detailed lesson plans for both our visits and after-school rehearsals. Secondly, I would step into the role of playwright, using the seniors' stories to create a script for our students to perform. Thirdly, as director, I would be working with the students to create an

original piece with the intention of taking the finished theatrical product to compete at the District 8 Florida Jr. Thespians Competition in December 2018.

In accepting responsibility of the roles of program designer, playwright, and director, I was highly aware of my own privilege that I carried into the experience with me. For example, as a 29-year-old, there was privilege in my age with both parties involved; to the students *and* the seniors, I was an adult with freedom to make my own decisions and take agency in my choices, though to one party, my privilege was rooted in being older, and to the other, my privilege was my youth. I was also privileged in my connections to Orlando REP. Having physical, financial, and intellectual resources from Orlando REP was an undeniable asset, and even having Emily's guidance throughout the *Come to the Table* development process was an undeniable privilege. Regardless, I walked into this program with an overwhelming awareness that my voice was to be one of many throughout the course of the following months and my priority was to create an experience that honored the perspective of each individual involved from start to finish.

The main objective of *Come to the Table* was always to create meaningful intergenerational relationships. We hoped that all of our participants, regardless of age, would find joy and social enlightenment through their interactions. It is easy to think that older generations and younger generations might have very little in common, but it was important to us as program creators to prove to our participants how that assumption might be lazy and unjustified. We all experience a vast range of emotions and moments of growth, and while the context of our experiences may differ, at the root of it all, we can still empathize with others because of our shared knowledge of what it means to be human. For example, the play that resulted from *Come to the Table* explores the injustice experienced by children sequestered to a kids' table, which closely parallels the injustices of being a resident in an assisted living facility.

There is far more that our participants shared beyond family recipes, and ultimately we all learned that perhaps we may all have more in common than originally thought.

Critical Juncture #1: Stay True to your Program Objective

In the fall of 2018, AMS students were invited to audition for the program by sharing a personal story that somehow involved food, cooking, or a family tradition. Twenty-three students bravely auditioned for a show for which they had hardly any context, knowing only that there was no script (yet) and that as a part of the cast, they were committing to visiting Encore as “story excavators” which would in turn inspire an original play that I would be writing. We planned for three Encore visits, scheduled on three consecutive Saturday mornings. While the adults coordinating and chaperoning the program understood the importance of these intergenerational interactions, we anticipated a degree of social awkwardness with the students going into our first visit. We expected there to be intimidation on behalf of both students and seniors, which could possibly hinder ease of conversation. We were also curious as to whether either generation would be dismissive of the other, prohibiting the development of meaningful relationships. For me as both program designer and playwright, there was a lot of pressure on the quality of the interviews the students would be conducting; without productive and engaging conversations, a verbatim script using transcripts of the seniors’ stories could result in flat and uninteresting text.

Arthur Strimling, founder of the intergenerational theatre program Roots and Branches, is a pioneer of theatrical cross-generational engagement. In his book, *Roots and Branches: Creating Intergenerational Theatre*, he explains,

The wisdom of a life well lived does not change – all of us are children and adolescents; to school, work, learn about sex, friendship, and love, money and family, success and failure, loyalty and betrayal, loneliness, self-mastery, about how to accept aging and

death. This kind of knowledge, as the Bible and great literature teach us, does not change from generation to generation, and can be transmitted. If the generations are in touch enough for it to happen. (Strimling 7)

The point he makes is that, while age can often seem like a huge disparity, as human beings, we have far more in common emotionally and developmentally than we may anticipate. Programs that successfully bring together multiple generations often have an objective to highlight the similarities between the younger and older, uniting them in their commonalities rather than focusing on what makes each generation different from the other. This was one of the challenges we hoped could be assuaged by the theme of food and family recipes, which we hypothesized might help our students and seniors find their likenesses, easing them into a productive and comfortable conversation.

In anticipation of social awkwardness, we provided a list of questions for students to ask the seniors, encouraging them to feel free to stray from our recommended conversation starters as they saw fit while also reiterating the importance of capturing stories centered around our overall theme, food and recipes. Clipboards in hand, the students set out to retrieve their answers from the residents. They divided into groups somewhat naturally, many students sticking with their close friends for safety. The seniors, too, were hesitant to participate at first. Intrigued by the commotion caused by the invasion of adolescents in the common space, a few residents agreed to join us for conversation and eventually excused themselves to rally their friends and neighbors to participate as well. Where at first there was hesitation, by the end of the morning, both students and seniors were looking forward to the following week's visit.

On our second visit, the students each volunteered to bring homemade dishes and treats to share with our Encore friends in hopes that sharing food around a table would further stimulate comfortable conversation. Students quickly migrated to the groups they had been in the

previous week, naturally drawn to the seniors with whom they had formed a meaningful connection in their introductory session. One group in particular gathered in a hallway, pulling chairs and tables to create a cumbersome meeting place in the midst of pedestrian traffic. Both generations' energy and curiosity in one another was tangible. With three Encore residents (two of whom were self-appointed "Trouble Number One" and "Trouble Number Two") and approximately six middle schoolers, the hallway group was consistently the loudest and most laughter-filled of our ensemble.

Shortly after our hallway group had assembled at their table for our second visit, I noticed that one of our students, Maya, had disappeared. I found her in the elevator, returning from the lobby with her phone in her hand. I inquired where she had gone, and she explained that the previous week, they had asked the residents in their group if any of them regretted not having tried a certain food in their lives (one of the questions provided on our interview prompt sheet.) She explained that one of the residents, Barbara, had answered with "pineapple pizza", so Maya had taken it upon herself on this visit to order a pineapple pizza to be delivered so that they could all try it together.

When the pizza arrived, the group was able to share in a unique and emotional experience of connectivity. Upon seeing the pizza box, Barbara was moved to tears. "I can't believe you remembered that," she told Maya while hugging and kissing the students in her group. Together, the students and residents (most of whom had never tried pineapple pizza) were able to share in a special moment of equality, trying something for the first time, together. The pineapple pizza was met with mixed reviews, but the moment of generosity and thoughtfulness that Maya created was undoubtedly one of the most rewarding of the entire *Come to the Table* experience.

Upon seeing the delight and emotion that grew as a result of Maya's kindness, I was struck with a thought that would soon become a prominent critical juncture in the *Come to the Table* process; the objective of the program was not just to create a play but rather to create relationships. The priority of our visits to Encore was not to mine text for our script. *It was to create meaningful moments and memories with individuals whom we may not have otherwise had the opportunity.* Maya's moment of kindness proved to me that the heart of this experience lay not just in storytelling, but in compassion and empathy, and in order to cultivate these moments, I had to trust the students to listen to the seniors and trust their own instincts. I had let my needs and preferences as a playwright get in the way of the true magic of *Come to the Table*, and it was this self-reflection after Maya's act of kindness that allowed me to reconnect to the foundation of *why* we created the program and ease my expectations of what *should* result from our visits. I knew I needed to give the students more agency in the composition of their interviews. My responsibility as playwright was not to find ways to service my own creative needs, but rather to try and capture the essence of the magic our students and seniors were creating on their own.

This moment of reflexive teaching artistry has largely informed my praxis. As Teaching Artists, we take ownership in our work and the products that we create (even if the product of what we're creating is, in fact, the creative process itself.) At times, however, we have to be reminded of the importance of flexibility in our work. It is our job to set our students up for success and to develop a curriculum that supports and guides their creative intuitions and impulses. Sometimes, however, as was the case in this particular moment in my teaching journey, the structure we provide, however well-intended, can cloud the original objective of the project. It was reflexive teaching that allowed me to apply self-reflection to my facilitation

during a critical moment in our program and reevaluate what it was that would ultimately make the project not only successful, but sustainable.

Critical Juncture #2: Don't Let Artistic Visions Become Obstacles

After each Encore visit, students would share recordings and transcripts of their conversations with the seniors with me to take home and begin compiling into a script. While the conversations and interactions were clearly meaningful to students and seniors alike, the content the students were collecting was more factual than fully developed stories. I had extensive lists of the seniors' favorite foods to eat and cook when they were young, but hardly any material highlighting tales of sharing them with loved ones or making them for special occasions. I knew whose mother made meatloaf every Thursday night or where someone grew up and how that may have influenced traditional cuisine but had no real sense of who the characters in these retellings were or how the people themselves influenced the traditions about which we were learning. As a playwright with every intention of using lines of these conversations verbatim in our script, I found myself struggling to tell a well-rounded and entertaining story with characters as dynamic as the seniors whose exact words I had every intention of honoring.

While capturing the energy and honesty of the seniors' voices was crucial to the creative process, above anything else, I wanted to ensure that whatever I created was an honest representation of the voices of the students for whom the play was written. In the TYA canon, it is all too common to find plays written by adults who believe they know what it is like to be a young person, likely because they *were*, at one time, a young person. Many of the experiences middle schoolers face today, however, were not relevant to myself when I was a middle schooler – so why would I write from my own memory of what it was like to be their age? For me,

inviting our students into the creative process was the only true way to ensure their voices were accurately represented.

Similarly, I was finding myself stuck on the issue of how we would appropriately convey the stories of an older generation as portrayed by middle schoolers. I was highly resistant to the idea of having the students play elderly people for fear that their performative interpretations would become caricatures of the seniors. The last thing we wanted to do was insult the very people whose personal stories we were using as inspiration. Additionally, particularly as a TYA practitioner, I was highly aware of the importance of creating a script that would provide the students artistic agency and ownership; asking them to play elderly people seemed like a surefire way to create distance between the performers and the material, despite their critical roles in the development of the piece. This created a challenge for me as playwright; how do I use verbatim dialogue from a senior perspective in the context of a show that honored students *as* young people?

About a week before the deadline for the first draft of the script, I met with *Come to the Table* co-creator, Emily Freeman. I was struggling with my strong desire to honor our unique intergenerational process while also writing a play that was, frankly, any good. Emily encouraged me to think about the moments and activities that had meant the most up until that point in the program. We had led the students through a variety of devising exercises, including movement and soundscape, and while they had contributed a number of useful moments to the shape of our performance, they were not particularly inspirational in regard to playwriting. Surprisingly, the moment that stood out the most was a getting-to-know-you activity we had coordinated on the first day of rehearsal titled Recipe of Me, in which each student created a recipe representative of themselves as individuals. The students' creative recipes included

ingredients such as “one quart of boba tea,” “one cancer ribbon,” and “three quarts of anxiety,” and directions were as imaginative as “Mix while reading anything by RR, bake for the length of a Harry Potter movie, let cool for the length of a Tomas Sanders vine compilation. Ice with theatre references and decorate with seashells.” While the activity served its purpose as an informal exercise through which we learned about one another, it also allowed us to incorporate our themes of food and family recipes and to allow the students to flex their creative muscles.

Emily and I began to pick apart the Recipe of Me exercise in an attempt to isolate what it was that made the activity so special. As we discussed, it became clear: Recipe of Me would be an exciting theatrical convention for the play that could help us learn more about characters with whom we may not have interacted otherwise. Recipe of Me could allow us to transcend generations and chronologically hop around a variety of time periods, introducing new family characters as they shared their own unique Recipe of Me monologues. The idea of these recipe vignettes suited both the narrative of the story and the theme of the program in addition to serving the dramatic structure of the play.

Though I felt relief once the decision to utilize the Recipe of Me monologues had been made, I still struggled with the desire to use our Encore transcripts verbatim. When I expressed this frustration to Emily, she kindly redirected me back to my Teaching Artist values and our *Come to the Table* program objectives. Though it may have been important to me as a playwright to try and incorporate the seniors’ exact language, nowhere in our original design of the program was that an obligation. *Come to the Table* was created to unite two disparate generations and ideally use those interactions to inspire a play for the middle school students to perform. A verbatim script was merely one theatrical technique that could be used as an option. It was this reconnection to my objectives as a teaching artist and program director that became the catalyst

for this critical juncture; *as an artist, I needed to let go of a self-inflicted creative obstacle that was holding me back from serving our overall program objective.*

After letting go of the pressure to write a verbatim script, the story began to fall into place. I no longer felt restricted by the pressure to utilize the seniors' exact words from our visits. Instead, the reflexive application of this self-reflection to my practice meant I could follow my own creative instincts to create a piece that would truly serve our middle school performers while still honoring the seniors' time and stories. My role as playwright was to capture the spirit and comradery of our Encore visits, not to regurgitate words onto a page. Once I had contextualized that priority for myself, our *Come to the Table* script became a joy to write rather than an obstacle.

Critical Juncture #3: Finding Commonalities in Generational Oppression

As both director and playwright for the *Come to the Table* process, I adamantly believed that the students should be playing characters their own age. This seemed an easier goal to accomplish once I had released the pressure of creating a verbatim script and thus relinquished the necessity of having elderly characters. Even so, I recognized the importance of finding some sort of social parallel between an older and younger generation for our story. In *Roots and Branches*, Arthur Strimling describes several similarities between younger and older generations. He explains,

...the issues elders face in their lives relate to almost any of the issues with which kids are dealing. All kids, for example, wrestle with independence and dependence. They want and need to be free of parental control, but they fear losing the protection, love, and support they also need...Elders, too, face issues of independence – physical, financial, and spiritual. The struggle to maintain or redefine independence in the face of these challenges is a major issue, and on at least one important level, it is the same as the one the younger ones face: how to sustain a sense of autonomy in the face of your real limitations and the desire and need of others to make decisions for you. (Strimling 34)

This passage brings attention to several intergenerational parallels, similarly to the previously referenced excerpt from Strimling. Aside from basic human experiences such as love and loss, both young people and old people can experience a profound sense of injustice, particularly in reference to their age. While this wasn't something I was mindful of at the beginning of the *Come to the Table* process, it became more apparent as I combed through recordings of our Encore interviews. Seniors would make subtle comments such as, "I used to love cooking, but they don't let us do much cooking here," and "I haven't made that since I lived in my own home and had my own kitchen." Though in passing these remarks seemed reflective and nostalgic, they were actually commentary on the oppression felt from living in a space where they did not have full agency over their actions and day-to-day activities. Though Encore is a beautiful establishment that treats residents with kindness and respect, there is undeniably a level of oppression that comes from living in any place designed to relieve individuals of elements of once-daily routines.

These sentiments articulated by the seniors were similar to challenges expressed by our students throughout our rehearsal process. As young people who were not yet old enough to drive, their availability for Encore visits and rehearsals was reliant upon the schedules of parents or older siblings; if someone else had a previous engagement, the student relying on them for transportation was at the mercy of their convenience. Additionally, school and schoolwork were consistently prioritized over extracurricular activities. Most adolescents are societally expected to attend school and maintain superior grades and the pressures of keeping up with homework and after-school programs can lead to stress and anxiety in students. Similarly to our seniors, who were experiencing oppression in the limitation of their activities, our students, too, were oppressed in regard to their own agency in their availability and transport.

As mentioned before, as a playwright creating a script for young people to perform, I was highly aware of my own privilege as an adult. I knew in order to write a script that felt authentic to the students and honored them as contributors throughout the program, I needed to include them in the story development process and utilize their unique perspectives. One day in rehearsal, we gathered in a circle on the floor and began discussing our own unique family traditions and recipes. The conversation dragged at times; not everyone felt they had something relevant to contribute (and some were simply uninterested in the conversation at all.) As we chatted, I found myself reflecting on the lack of engagement in our discussion and hurriedly racked my brain to find a way for the twenty-five middle school students to buy into the subject. How could these young people find agency in a conversation about holidays and family traditions, over most of which they had no say in the matter?

Then it hit me.

“Has anyone ever sat at a kids’ table before?” I asked them. Every single student groaned loudly and nearly two dozen hands shot into the air, armed and ready with stories about the injustice of a kids’ table. There were complaints about being forced to sit with and entertain younger siblings or cousins. Several students protested about the disparity in food that was offered to a kids table. Others expressed frustration in the banning of cell phones and tablets. Nearly every student had experienced being segregated to a designated space based on age, and while not everyone’s experience was negative, the majority of our cast shared their displeasure regarding a kids’ table. It was instantaneously clear to me that I had touched a nerve with this subject, and the passion with which the students were now engaged in conversation was electric. This critical juncture was imperative to the development of our story and the program as a whole. Now the students were personally invested. This wasn’t just the seniors’ story anymore –

it was *theirs*, too. *Setting our play at a kids' table allowed our students to take ownership in the creative process and to authentically connect to the play as a whole.*

When it came to the representation of both the students' and the seniors' experiences, the centralization of a kids table suited many needs. There is a parallel oppression in both a kids' table and a nursing home; adults make the decision to segregate young people from the older by placing them at a specified table (sometimes even in a different area of the house than the main celebratory activity), and the decision to move a senior citizen into a retirement home is more often than not made by a younger and more mobile family member. Interestingly, the deciding group in either situation is privileged by their age, though in one scenario, the older party has the sway and in the other, the younger. Regardless, the experience of a child placed at a kids' table and a senior rehomed to a retirement community both experience feelings of isolation, voicelessness, and injustice. This parallel was something that excited me as I began to write.

The play began to take shape. There would be five young people at the kids' table, one family of three siblings and two cousins. Through the discovery of Grandma's secret family recipe box, they would uncover miniature biographies of family members through recipe cards, each shared with the audience as a monologue structured as a Recipe of Me. The remaining cast would act as an ensemble, heightening the dramatic storytelling with tableau, creative movement, and breakout moments as various family members, each character portrayed as their middle-school self, emerging from multiple time periods. This allowed the cast of adolescents to play appropriately-aged characters while still reinforcing familial connections to the main characters like grandma and grandpa, great-aunts and uncle.

Another of my core beliefs as a TYA practitioner is that shows for and with young people don't need to avoid difficult subjects. As adults, we may try and protect youth from prematurely

experiencing difficult subjects, but that doesn't mean they don't engage with them all the same. By segregating young people to a kids' table, we may think we are keeping them from "grown up" subjects that may arise at a table of adults, but the truth is, even kids struggle with issues that challenge us emotionally. The process of developing *Come to the Table* presented our young students with some challenging questions about aging and death, and I felt it exceedingly important to represent these moments of emotional and empathetic growth in the script.

In our story, the three leads, siblings Leah, Tyler, and Danielle, have found Grandma Lucy's secret recipe box and broken into it, discovering a rich background of family history. Cousins Frankie and Dorrie have also been banished to the kids' table. Leah is the most vocal about her displeasure of being resigned to the kids' table, and when her younger sister, Danielle, finally reaches a breaking point, she reveals that this may be their last Thanksgiving at Grandma and Grandpa's, as Grandma Lucy has begun to lose her memory. Together, the kids grapple with the idea of memory loss and the upheaval of family routine and tradition. This pivotal moment in the script is representative of one of the harder lessons our students faced throughout the creative process, and my intention was to find an elegant way to address this tenuous element of any intergenerational programming.

The final script was also titled *Come to the Table*, a decision made by the entire cast after our first read-through. We felt that not only was it directly representative of the journey we had taken to get to the finished script, but that it also invited an audience to share in our story. While the Encore residents' words didn't appear verbatim in the script, there were a handful of nods and winks to our time together. I made sure to include references to pineapple pizza, Trouble Number One and Trouble Number Two, and many of the other residents were mentioned by name in titles of recipes. The seniors were such a pivotal part of the entire

experience, and for me, their enjoyment of the students' visits and desire to connect with a younger generation was what I felt was critical to capture in the script. Grandma Lucy, the heart and soul of the story, though not seen onstage until the very end of the play, represented the love and appreciation the seniors showed us.

Conclusion

When I reflect upon the *Come to the Table* journey, I am filled with an overwhelming sense of pride. The experience did indeed meet the goals we had originally set for ourselves, creating meaningful connections with people in our community who may not have otherwise had the opportunity to interact. In doing so, we created a beautiful story that touched on many important lessons we learned together, far beyond what we had imagined could be possible from the beginning of our process. We took our final production to compete at the Florida Jr. Thespians District 8 one-act competition, where it was selected to move on to the state competition as representative for District 8. At the Jr. Thespians State competition, it also won best in show and was selected to perform as the Jr. Thespian State champion one-act alongside high school productions from all across the state of Florida. The show touches people in a way that many other shows written for youth performers lack, and I firmly believe it is the ownership that the performers have in the piece combined with the inspiration we received from the seniors that has created a play that will continue to supersede generational boundaries.

This program was invaluable to me as an evolving Teaching Artist. The creative junctures expressed above, as well as many others, honed my praxis and taught me how to truly challenge myself as both an artist and a teacher, finding the balance between my own creative visions and the needs of the students involved. As an artist, I had to learn how to relieve the

creative strictures with which I was unwittingly limiting myself, allowing the challenges and successes of the process to enhance the ultimate product. As a teacher, I needed to prioritize the inclusion of my students' perspectives and opinions in order to provide them with an experience that honored their voices and helped them grow as artists and individuals. Without practicing reflexive teaching, the outcome of the program could have been vastly different; I may still be struggling to write a verbatim script based off of our Encore transcripts. It is the acknowledgement of my own reflections and then the application of what I've learned from my reflections that defines my praxis.

Upon conclusion of the project, there are several questions that I have regarding the *Come to the Table* process, including, How might I have incorporated a hands-on devising process with the students when it came to development of the text itself? How could incorporating the Recipe of Me activity into our Encore visits (i.e., having the seniors create their own Recipes of Me with the help of the students) have informed better character development? Would including the seniors in our devising activities have led us to new creative discoveries? What tactics could I have used to better obtain stories from the seniors, rather than simple interview responses? How could we have engaged students' families intergenerationally? How could this project be marketed as a sustainable drama program and shared with other schools and assisted living facilities in our community and beyond?

There were also several things I wish I had done differently in retrospect, the first being hosting a conclusive reflection with both seniors and students (either together or separately.) Collecting seniors' feedback on our visits would have been highly beneficial to learn how I could strengthen the intergenerational community engagement process for future iterations of this programming. Similarly, I wish I had structured more reflections for the students throughout our

creative process, beyond brief check-ins and informal questionings of the script. As an adult that would like to continue writing for young people, I wish I had *better* utilized the opportunity to reflect alongside them in order to inform my own process in trying to create professional-quality work that best represents young voices and perspectives. I also would have liked to maintain relationships between the students and seniors beyond our three visits, either with letter-writing or another form of communication. We strongly emphasized the importance of building intergenerational connections in our communities in the beginning of the program, but in hindsight, I wish I had also focused on the sustainability of the relationships we were working so hard to establish.

My passion for intergenerational programming still drives much of my work as a Teaching Artist; *Come to the Table* was the project that helped me recognize this facet of my creative identity. I will forever be grateful to the communities that embraced *Come to the Table* and the stories that were shared along the way. Ultimately, the things I learned from this program were invaluable to my career in TYA and still help shape my teaching artistry to this day. The critical junctures explored in this chapter have strengthened me as an educator and an artist, and the effects of that growth continue to inform how I teach and create. Praxis is not limited to a single project, but rather is a living and breathing practice that carries over from one opportunity to the next. The things I've learned from *Come to the Table* influence every class, summer camp, and rehearsal process I lead; it will forever be a source of pride and growth both for my personal praxis and my creative identity.

CHAPTER THREE: MULTIMODAL PERFORMING ARTS INTERVENTION

Come to the Table established my interest in intergenerational theatre. It opened my eyes to the potential to build community connections, create for and alongside underserved demographics, and form relationships between generations that may not have otherwise had the occasion to associate. Once the project began to gain momentum, opportunities to be a part of other intergenerational programs seemed to pop up. One such project was the Multimodal Performing Arts Intervention (MPAI) Arts and Wellness research study, conducted in partnership with the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts (DPC) and Advent Health. The study aimed to look at how improvisation-based theatre classes could potentially reduce stress levels in caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. I accepted the position as Lead Interventionist with great enthusiasm and open-mindedness.

The MPAI study held more than just my creative interest. In 2008, my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the same disease that had afflicted her mother years before. After her diagnosis, the need for domestic, medical, and emotional support was undisputable, for both my grandmother and grandfather, who had stepped into the role of her full-time caregiver (and who was later diagnosed with Alzheimer's himself in 2012.) In the summer of 2011, my mother, sister, and I moved from Michigan to Long Island to be better able to support my grandparents. The role of caregiver was exhausting, constant, and often thankless. Simple tasks often felt like uphill battles, met with resistance from one or both grandparents - not to mention the emotional struggle of watching people you love losing their independence.

Dr. Ann Davis Basting, a professor of theatre at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee specializes in creating theatre with individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. In her book

Forget Memory, she discusses societal challenges regarding the stigma of memory loss. In an attempt to better understand the negative framework of the disease, Basting interviewed a number of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia, as well as their familial caregivers. There was an overwhelming response of not wanting to be a "burden" on one's family. Basting explains, "They saw shame in such 'dependency.' No one described the experience of dementia as positive in any way, for either the person going through it or the family members. No one imagined the caregiving experience had the potential to be reciprocal. Instead, all the responses about being a burden assumed that the person with dementia takes while the caregiver gives and gives and gives" (Basting 8). In my own family, we certainly experienced pushback from my grandparents as their caregivers; neither my grandmother or grandfather wanted to depend on us in the ways that we were attempting to help, creating further tension and general frustration between the three generations.

Dr. Basting's work with seniors in the field of theatre has revolutionized the way we approach creative dramatics with the elderly. At the root of her work as a practitioner is a commitment to the inclusion of seniors throughout the creative process, not simply treating them as spectators. Her program *The Penelope Project* connected faculty and students from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, artists from Sojourn Theatre Company, and staff and residents Luther Manor, a retirement community in Milwaukee, for a two-year theatrical journey that set out to tell a different version of Homer's *The Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus's wife, Penelope. The development of the two-year project included a multitude of devising exercises and activities that engaged the seniors at Luther Manor, including those with cognitive challenges such as Alzheimer's and dementia. The residents' input ultimately created the content for the final performance, providing the seniors with creative agency and pride. Additionally, Dr.

Basting also founded TimeSlips, a nonprofit organization that “supports a global movement to bring meaning and joy to late life through creative engagement.” TimeSlips encourages connectivity through activities that celebrate being present in-the-moment rather than attempting to engage individuals who may be coping with memory loss through memory recall. Instead, TimeSlips celebrates senior individuals for who they are in the now, allowing for more meaningful connection that assuages fear and shame.

Having discovered Dr. Basting’s work many years after acting as caregiver for my grandparents, I can’t help but wonder how the tools it provides may have helped to ease communication and connection within our own family dynamic. Eventually, the role of in-home caregiver for both grandparents was too much for our family to handle. We were also extremely fortunate to have had the resources to move them into a comfortable assisted living facility with around-the-clock care. For many others, however, assisted living is not a feasible option. For these caregivers, the stresses and pressures of caring for a loved one with memory loss full-time are often detrimental to mental and emotional health, straining personal relationships and affecting job performance. The MPAI study aimed to help relieve some of the anxieties of caregiving through a series of eight one-hour classes held at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. Approximately five to ten dyads (partnerships of one caregiver and one care recipient, or “care partner”) made up each cohort, or round of classes. Approximately 20 cohorts were included in the study, including several control group cohorts who did not participate in the drama course. In addition to personal reflections, the research gathered from the program was collected in the form of saliva samples from the caregivers, measuring cortisol levels as indications of stress. As of the writing of this thesis, the results from the MPAI research study have not yet been released.

The project, like any other, was not without its challenges. As young, able-bodied practitioners, my co-Teaching Artist, Jessica, and I, were privileged in several ways; we had relatively unlimited mobility, previous education in both theatre and improvisation, as well as our own agency in caring for ourselves (and only ourselves.) Though both of us had previous experience as caregivers, we did not identify as caregivers throughout the duration of the study, meaning that we had full agency over our actions and independence in our decision-making. These privileges provided a number of reflexive teaching moments that forced us to make on-the-spot decisions and frequently reassess our facilitation. We were also often met with a variety of temperaments and attitudes, some resistant to join in and play and others who found it difficult to release the reins of caregiving on their care partner, even in a safe, controlled setting.

Throughout the course of the MPAI study, I found myself consistently inspired by Dr. Basting's work. The skills and resources that TimeSlips provides for caregivers and loved ones of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia revel in the celebration of being present with one another. This was something that I hoped to incorporate into my facilitation throughout the study. Dr. Basting's work to de-stigmatize Alzheimer's and dementia also influenced the way I approached facilitating this course, though, as evidenced in the critical junctures below, took me longer to figure out what that meant for our class dynamic as a whole. Regardless, seeing the passion in her writing and program design led me to develop a strong desire to support the underserved demographic of individuals with memory loss, and Dr. Basting's experience in the field undoubtedly fueled my own.

My relative inexperience working with this particular demographic certainly challenged me as a Teaching Artist, but the lessons I've learned from my participation in this study have been some of the most valuable. There were many critical junctures experienced throughout the

study. The following three that are discussed are the ones I believe to be most formative to my growth as a Teaching Artist working with caregivers and individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia.

Critical Juncture #1: Serve your Participants and the Program Objective

When Jessica and I were brought onto the project, we were provided a curriculum that had been designed by a former DPC leader and a third-party organization specializing in program and curriculum design. Both the DPC and Advent Health were brought in to train us on the curriculum, as well as behavioral expectations of our participants both with Alzheimer's or dementia and their caregivers. We were provided materials with community resources regarding caregiving support. Additionally, we were given large binders containing the full curriculum and any paper materials needed throughout the course of the program. The training was thorough and intense; neither Jessica nor I had previously had the opportunity to teach these specific demographics and both us as Teaching Artists and the staff members of DPC and Advent Health were fully invested in preparing us to best serve our student body.

We were instructed to begin each class in a seated circle using provided chairs, but to encourage participants to stand and be active throughout the course of the program. As stated in the Space Set-Up and Materials section in our Class One curriculum, "The instructor will encourage participants to use the chairs when needed, but a goal throughout the intervention is to have participants on their feet and active as much as reasonably possible" (6). While it was initially our intention to include warmups that engaged participants on their feet, it was clear from our very first session that this would prove more challenging than we had initially anticipated. Several of our participants were utilizing canes, scooters, or even wheelchairs for additional mobility support. The majority of our participants were over the age of 50. Needless to

say, curriculum suggestions such as having participants lie on the floor for physical warmups suddenly seemed unrealistic, and Jessica and I quickly reassessed our facilitation of the rest of the class, as well as the physical expectations of our participants.

Even with our in-the-moment adjustments, we still faced a number of challenges when it came to physical limitations in our first class. Our down-to-the-second curriculum suffered from transition times when we requested that participants adjust their chairs to face their partners; what we had assumed would take seconds actually took about two full minutes to accomplish safely. Activities that had participants jumping in to tag one another out of scenes seemed daunting, and it was obvious that physical challenges limited a willingness to contribute to games.

As a Teaching Artist, it was a struggle to watch participants disengage because of an inability to meet physical requirements of the curriculum. While we did our best to modify activities as we went along, it was clear that our privilege as able-bodied young people (relative to our participants) was coming to the forefront of our class. The curriculum had been influenced and approved by specialists who work with demographics suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia, undoubtedly with only the kindest and best intentions. As the facilitators in the room with the participants, however, it was clear to us that in order to best serve the objectives of the program, alterations needed to be made. *In order to set ourselves and our students up for success, we needed to majorly adjust our expectations of the participants' needs and abilities to create an environment where everyone included felt safe, supported, and capable.*

This critical juncture forced us as Teaching Artists to acknowledge our own privilege of physical ability and reconstruct our lessons in a way that took advantage of our own freedom of movement while meeting the needs of our participants. For example, in the game Hitch Hiker -

in which various characters are picked up by a taxi until the “driver” can correctly identify their mystery character trait - rather than have participants physically move into the center of our circle to sit on a chair in the “backseat” of Jessica’s cab, Jessica moved her “driver’s seat” chair to be positioned in front of the participants’ stationary chair, allowing everyone to stay comfortably seated. Additionally, by removing the obstacle of physical relocation, we were better able to engage every single participant who may otherwise have used mobility limitations as an excuse to not engage in the activity.

Our physical ability was not our only privilege, however. The design of the curriculum – as well as our facilitation – relied heavily on our preexisting knowledge of theatre and improvisation. It was easy enough for Jessica and me to demonstrate improv games with one another because of our confidence in our performance skills and trust in one another as scene partners. We often found ourselves having to pause mid-game to explain fundamental vocabulary or ideas to participants because we hadn’t yet introduced them to our students. Not only was this fractured facilitation frustrating for us as Teaching Artists, but we also noticed our participants understandably disengaging from material they were struggling to follow.

An example of a moment in the curriculum that was limited by both physical and theatrical accessibility of participants was a game that we were instructed to facilitate on our very first day. In the first iteration of the MPAI curriculum, day one culminated in an improv game titled Freeze. As stated in the curriculum guide, the game is played as follows:

The instructor will ask two volunteers to step on stage while the rest of the participants sit and wait for the right moment to join in. As with most improv activities, audience participation is essential. For the first time playing, the instructor will request suggestions for a specific location from the audience...The instructor should encourage the audience to be creative and specific with their suggestions...The actors quickly select an interesting setting and begin a scene. The instructor establishing a storyline and point of conflict as quickly as possible. The instructor should encourage them to move about the stage space, pantomiming props they wish to incorporate. After an interesting scene has

begun to develop, the instructor (or a participant in the audience) can now shout “Freeze!” to participate in the scene. Once “freeze” is called, the actors onstage remain motionless. The person who called out “freeze” should go on stage, replacing one of the actors and recreating the exact same pose they were in. The new actor will launch a new scene with a different setting and characters, and the other actor should accept this new story being created. The instructor should encourage participants to let the physical positions influence the storyline of the next scene (for example, if one set of performers is frozen while in the middle of a tug of war contest, the next scene could take place at an Amish barn raising). The instructor should also make sure each scene is given enough time to develop (usually at least 2-3 minutes.) This activity can be challenging or intimidating at first, so the instructor may need to provide more guidance and coaching early on.

As predicted in the last line of the activity description, our cohorts found it to be a particularly challenging game.

Throughout our facilitation of Freeze, Jessica and I frequently found ourselves pausing to introduce new improv and theatre vocabulary that the curriculum hadn’t yet defined.

Additionally, none of our participants had former performance or improvisation experience and were already feeling out of place being asked to jump up and perform what turned out to be a fairly advanced improv game. It was quickly clear to us as facilitators that we had not set up our participants for success in playing Freeze; we had only begun establishing a safe space where players could feel wholly comfortable making bold, silly choices in front of peers and strangers. The game was a failure, despite participants’ best efforts. A handful of caregivers took a risk and jumped into the game - albeit with hesitation – but in addition to feeling intimidated by the act of physically standing and engaging in the activity, following the constantly changing plots of the messily performed scenes proved difficult for most of our participants with neurocognitive challenges.

Sometime later, Jessica and I were reflecting after facilitating Freeze with a handful of various cohorts. We discussed how, although the game objectives aligned with the intentions of the research study, its placement on the first day of the program counteracted the very things we

were hoping to foster, including a sense of accomplishment and confidence in making bold choices (even if they resulted in failure). The game, we concluded, would be much better suited positioned toward the end of the course once participants were equipped with the proper improv techniques and following a scaffolding of simpler and more easily digestible activities. Freeze, Jessica shared, was a game even skillful improvisors struggled to perform; asking our participants to attempt it on their first day of our program seemed, in many ways, unfair. We weren't setting them up for success, building their trust, or creating a safe space.

After several rounds of the study, Jessica and I were invited to share our curriculum notes and adjustments with the DPC and Advent Health team. With the support of our leadership team, we were able to make adjustments to the curriculum to better suit the needs of our participants that we had learned firsthand in the classroom. We reconfigured activities to require less mobility and engage dyads while seated. We scaffolded the entire structure of our 8-week course to begin by teaching participants basic improv and theatrical vocabulary and concepts needed to set them up for success as we gained momentum toward more intensive improv games. Even scaffolding, however, had its challenges, as lessons needed to build upon one another from each week to the next, but working with our specific demographic, we also couldn't make the assumption that knowledge imparted one week would be carried over to the following class. What resulted was a curriculum that was paced properly, introduced one – maybe two – new concepts per week, and gently encouraged participants to play and engage with both the material and one another.

The development of our curriculum would not have been possible if not rooted in our active in-class reflections as Teaching Artists. Jessica and I could have easily continued teaching with the original provided curriculum and probably managed to find shortcuts and techniques to

make things easier for our students. But reflexive Teaching Artists don't just work to make things easier for their students; reflexive Teaching Artists find new ways to better serve their students and meet their needs. Our original curriculum, while designed with intellect and the best of intentions, didn't *best* serve our participants. By using our reflections to adapt our preexisting curriculum with our leadership team, we were able to more fully and successfully engage dyads and encourage everyone to step out of their comfort zone, better meeting the goals and expectations of the study as a whole. As a result, my praxis adjusted yet again, and we learned the power and responsibility of becoming the voice on behalf of our student body.

Critical Juncture #2: Reconnection is Key

One of the more successful activities in our first round of classes was a game called Props, wherein we passed an object around the circle and each person was asked to pantomime using the object in an action for which it was not originally intended. For example, a wooden spoon could become a conductor's baton or a compact mirror with which a participant could apply their lipstick. At first the game felt daunting; being handed a tactile object that is distinctly recognizable for its function can often stifle creative processing. Not to mention that as adults we are often dissuaded from using our imaginations to think outside the box. The first few rounds of the activity were not particularly inventive; spoons were used to stir soup or scoop ice cream. A hat was placed on top of the head, as a hat. A fake lei was worn around the neck while the participant waved her hands from side to side, as if hula dancing.

Jessica and I, however, were quick to realize the unrecognized potential of this game when played with this demographic of caregivers and individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. Although it initially seemed like using a spoon for its intended use was a failure, we reflected later that it was the first time we had seen our participants playing in the space and

committing to their play. Typically, there would be a few moments of hesitation when handed the object, but once someone had an idea, they would embrace the pantomime for exactly what it was – fun, silly play. Pantomiming stirring soup was still a pantomime, still a ready and willing “Yes, and...” from a participant. How could we possibly deem that a failure?

The peak success of this activity came from a particularly vibrant cohort that typically embraced the silliness of our class in a way in which other cohorts often struggled. In this group, the variety of ways they creatively interpreted the objects we passed was exciting and riled up the entire group in laughter and encouragement. We were passing around a straw hat when a caregiver chose to reinvent the hat as a watering can, and when she passed it onto the gentleman beside her – a quiet individual with both Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s – she splashed the “water” into his face and he reacted instantaneously by pantomiming surprise and delight, wiping the water from his face and hands before taking the hat for himself. The group roared in laughter. His reaction had been both committed to play and rooted in authenticity, making for a beautiful example of what it means to “Yes, and...” your partner.

During our final group reflection that day, when it was time for his wife and caregiver to share her thoughts, tears formed in her eyes. “In the midst of this disease,” she said, “I’d forgotten how funny he is.” *Is*. Not *was*. It wasn’t a moment of sad nostalgia, remembering the man he used to be before memory loss – it was a realization that with the right tools, accessing the ability to reconnect with loved ones we often think of as “lost” or “not their former selves” is simple. *It was in this reflection that I began to realize that the benefit of this class didn’t lie in the structure of the curriculum, it lay in the moments of reconnection that were unexpectedly unearthed in the midst of a game or activity.* The power of stepping outside of a routine-calloused comfort zone to experience a shared vulnerability meant equalizing everyone in the

room and providing a safe space to embrace both successes and glorious failures with patience and encouragement. Basting's philosophies regarding celebrating seniors for who they are in the present moment suddenly had a relevant application to our project; we could only encourage genuine connection when we shed the stigma of the disease "taking away" the loved one in question. Our class space was brimming with love – it was when we began to discard the lens of grief that our participants were able to see one another with a newfound joy and relief.

Jessica and I began to discuss ways in which we could highlight more of these moments of spontaneous connectivity. We were noticing a trend in our caregivers quickly jumping in to support their care partners, as they spent the majority of their time doing outside of class. Their intentions were clearly to take care of their partner, often interjecting ideas or memories, or offering hints and clues to enhance their participation in an activity. As a former caregiver myself, I immediately recognized the responsibility of becoming your care partner's voice, a task caregivers manage all day long, whether at grocery stores, doctors' appointments, or church. Speaking on behalf of one's care partner saves time, provides accurate answers, and even serves as self-preservation for both caregiver and care partner. It is, however, an ineffective tactic when trying to encourage creative agency and play, and Jessica and I made it a mission of our facilitation to reassure caregivers that it was okay if their partner took time to share an idea or suggestion in class. Once caregivers began to release the responsibility of speaking on behalf of their care partners, a sense of true comradery started to take root. Personalities were expressed. Playful, unexpected suggestions were offered throughout activities, and the rest of the group would accept the inventive offerings with humor and patience. Essentially, once everyone began establishing themselves as creative equals in the space, the group dynamic began to find its balance and our classroom became a safe space to explore and take risks.

Another successful activity was Picture Prompted Stories. Each group received a preselected, printed stock photograph depicting a person or several people engaging in some sort of action. Using critical analysis to evaluate context clues such as environment, body language, and clothing, they were then asked (in their partnerships) to create a story about what was happening in the photograph. Some stories offered more obvious details (such as three well-dressed children shoving each other in a church pew), but others were more challenging, such as an image showing three generations of women leaning over a pot on a stove with varied facial expressions. Each dyad was then asked to share their story with the rest of the group, sharing the responsibility of narrating as a team.

Again, what was successful about the Picture Prompted Story activity was the equalizing nature of the instructions; while the caregiver may have taken the lead in asking questions regarding the provided image, it was the care partner who was given the opportunity to make creative suggestions, including them as an artistic contributor to the exercise. Another element of success with this story was its accessibility outside of class; Picture Prompted Story could easily be facilitated over breakfast, using photographs in the morning newspaper and including anyone who may be seated at the kitchen table. It is an activity that provides artistic agency and invites anyone and everyone to participate, strengthen relationships, and return to the human roots of storytelling.

This critical juncture was crucial in the success of the MPAI project. As Teaching Artists, we needed to realize the value of the study was not in participants' acquisition of basic improv and theatre skills, but rather connectivity with one another. Caregivers' release of stress could only begin when they experienced a sense of freedom in letting their care partners make their own artistic decisions. Additionally, the freedom to make a creative decision allowed care

partners to actively participate and take ownership in their expression – something they may not have had the opportunity to experience in quite some time. Improvisation is wonderful, and the humor it often brings can be, in and of itself, healing. For our study, it was the connectedness and joy it generated that left a lasting impression and allowed our participants to establish a shared – and safe – space in which to play and enjoy one another’s company again.

In regard to reflexive teaching, this critical juncture is a perfect example of how process can be valued over product. While we were never working to create a finished performance piece throughout the course, we were hoping for a specific measurable outcome (the reduction of stress in caregivers as determined by their cortisol levels.) As facilitators inside the classroom, however, it was apparent that the true moments of gratification and stress-relief came as we engaged imaginations, released creative inhibitions, and invited play into our space. These moments would not have been attainable had we not practiced reflexive teaching, recognizing the importance of prioritizing dyad connectivity and applying it to our in-class facilitation.

Critical Juncture #3: Embrace the Elephant in the Room

While it was never a secret that our project was intended for caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer’s and dementia and their care partners, from the moment our first class began, it almost felt as if bringing up the subject of memory loss was taboo. I knew from personal experience that if we attempted to mention the disease to either of my grandparents after they were diagnosed, they would vehemently deny any association with the subject. Going into this project, I was apprehensive about addressing the elephant of the room, lest anyone get offended or upset by the mere suggestion of the condition. Instead, we skirted around the issue at hand. This, unfortunately, led to a handful of end-of-class reflections and discussions that felt more like

caregivers speaking in code regarding their care partners, actively avoiding the conversation about the challenges with which literally half of the class struggled.

For a while, the group dynamic seemed to be one of walking on eggshells, no one ever *really* mentioning the real reason we were all in a classroom together. It was never particularly discussed in our training how we should approach the subject; rather, we had agreed that we would follow the participants' lead in how the topic may be addressed. It occurred to us several weeks in, however, that it was *us* – the Teaching Artists - establishing and reinforcing the taboo nature of the disease while we thought we were being supportive of the needs of our students. It certainly was never our intention to create a space where participants couldn't be open and honest about their experiences; in retrospect, I think we were nervous to bring it up ourselves out of fear of alienating those who were being cared *for*, thus already experiencing a sense of powerlessness. If anything, it came from a place of wanting to give caregivers and their care partners an hour of relief from thinking or talking about their challenges with memory loss rather than having to address it head-on.

One day, we were in the midst of an activity that had picked up momentum and was going particularly well. One gentleman had chosen to participate on his feet, bouncing around the circle as he engaged with various scene partners. The energy was exciting, and everyone was laughing when suddenly the game came to an abrupt halt. All eyes were on the participant, who was suddenly stumbling over his words and struggling to express himself. Deflated, he threw his arms up in the air and loudly declared, "I'm sorry. I have Alzheimer's!" Everyone in the class laughed and shared words of encouragement as he found his place and picked up the scene from where he had left off. For the rest of the class, it was as if a protective bubble had finally burst.

Everyone's shoulders seemed to relax. The subject was no longer taboo – we could finally address the elephant in the room.

By the end of that class, caregivers and care partners alike began to share personal experiences with honesty and relief. Dyads were empathetic toward one another, expressing comradery and sharing similar stories and solutions. It was evident that what had been missing from our group dynamic was a safe space to share caregiver anecdotes openly and without fear of judgment. Jessica and I made sure to include care partners in the conversations as well in order to maintain an equal playing space, but they were just as receptive to sharing and listening to one another's experiences as everyone else. From that point on, the energy of the program shifted. *By addressing the fact that we were united because of the shared experience of Alzheimer's and dementia in one way or another, the class became as much a support group as a safe space for playing and letting go of inhibitions.*

Jessica and I recognized the importance of this critical realization immediately and began to shift the framework of our facilitation to be one that unabashedly sought to address the challenges our participants were facing and finding ways to connect our in-class activities to benefit their at-home caregiving partnerships. We presented our warmup exercises as an easily-implemented daily routine to connect and check-in with both their own bodies and one another. Games that required only imagination were suggested for doctors' office waiting rooms or after-dinner family activities. The last five minutes of every class was saved for non-class-related check-ins and sharing community resources that other participants may find helpful. The stress relief was not only in the joy and laughter devised from the curriculum, but also the sense of community that was built over the course of eight sessions. By the end of each cycle, cohorts were creating contact lists to stay in touch and continue to help and support one another.

In the end, by trying to protect our participants from the very thing that united us all in a classroom together, we were doing everyone a disservice; in fact, we were prohibiting everyone from connecting in the very way they needed. It also made Alzheimer's and dementia something weighted by shame, hindering us from celebrating the individuals whose lives it had inevitably changed. We allowed the disease to have power in our safe space, and it took one participant bluntly unveiling the proverbial elephant in the room to provide the freedom we all needed to accept what cannot be changed and use it as fuel to connect and grow from one another, finding joy along the way.

Conclusion

There are plenty of studies proving how the arts are beneficial for individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. The MPAI study was distinctive in its approach to caregivers and the uniqueness of the caregiver-care partner relationship. While the study has not yet released a final analysis, the immediate effects of the Arts and Wellness course on our participants was evident. There was always far more laughter coming out of the room after class than upon arrival. Caregivers were visibly more relaxed and at ease after flexing their creative muscles and reconnecting with their care partners. At the end of nearly every 8-week course, participants created contact lists and exchanged phone numbers and email addresses to stay in touch and further strengthen the community they had built together in class.

Practicing reflexive teaching artistry was critical to the success of this project; without questioning my own preconceived notions of our participants' abilities (both cognitive and physical), acknowledging my own privilege, and challenging my stigmas of memory loss, I would not have been able to provide our participants with an experience that safely challenged and successfully supported them. By bringing this reflective awareness into my practice, I was

better able to serve our participants and the study as a whole, realigning my own values with the intentions of the project. After all, the desired outcome of the class was to alleviate caregivers' stress, and without being attentive to their needs and receptive to adjusting curriculum, we could not have been successful in our mission. As a Teaching Artist for this project, there was nothing more satisfying than watching our participants learn to step outside their comfort zones, whether taking a risk in an improv game or sitting back to let a care partner speak for themselves. These triumphant milestones wouldn't have been possible had it not been for practicing reflexive teaching artistry.

CHAPTER FOUR: *WHEN PIGS FLY*

The MPAI research study opened my eyes to the ways in which our growing demographic of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia is currently theatrically underserved. Conventional plays and musicals often have intricate linear plots and dense dialogue that can be a struggle for those with cognitive challenges or memory loss to follow. Not to mention that long run times and stationary theatre seats can cause restlessness and physical discomfort. As TYA practitioners, we invest our efforts in using theatre to encourage and stimulate creative growth in the youngest members of our community but we rarely think about the ways in which we can do the same for our elders. In the midst of facilitation for the MPAI study, I began to brainstorm ideas of how we might make theatre more accessible for those with memory loss.

At the same time the MPAI research study was being conducted, my colleague Maria Katsadourous and I were remounting an original devised Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) show titled *When Pigs Fly*. Created specifically for young people 0-6 years of age, TVY establishes a space where the invitation to play and engage is embedded in every performance. In their article *Developing Wonder: Teaching Theatre for the Very Young Through Collaboration with Developmental Psychology*, Dr. Thalia Goldstein, Professor of Developmental Psychology, and Adrienne Kapstein, Professor of Physical Acting and Ensemble Creation at Pace University state, "TVY artists harness the child's inherent curiosity to encounter the world in a direct and experiential manner and theatre for this audience reflects this in its use of participatory and immersive practices and the incorporation of multisensory stimuli in design and production" (Kapstein). TVY creates an environment where vocal reactions are not just tolerated but expected. Performances often incorporate sensory play, engaging senses that are typically ignored in traditional theatre pieces, such as smell, touch, and sometimes even taste. Young

people are encouraged to participate in the telling of the story, considered members of the performing ensemble who are integral to the success of the art. In this way, TVY honors the presence of the very young and their right to experience live theatre.

Following a particularly positive MPAI class one afternoon, Maria and I were discussing the lack of theatre intentionally created for audiences with Alzheimer's and dementia. In our experience creating work for and alongside young people and seniors, we were inspired by a new idea; what benefits might we find in performing theatre originally created for the very young for older audiences with memory loss? TVY celebrates an audience that lives and experiences theatre in the moment. It's innovative content, however, is not limited to the very young; rather, people of all ages are invited and encouraged to engage in an art form filled with color, spectacle, energizing music, and scripted audience participation featuring popular conventions such as play, sensory stimulation, and discovery. While TVY is feted for honoring the development of individuals 0 - 6 years old, we often disregard the importance of play for our more mature audience members. We asked ourselves, what could a theatrical experience with seniors look like when framed as an invitation to play? Would the devices utilized in a traditional TVY experience succeed in engaging an older audience?

The shared reflections of our concurrent programs (*When Pigs Fly* and the MPAI research study) sparked a seed of curiosity; what would it look like to bring TVY, rooted in discovery and play, to an audience of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia? After the exposure to working with those affected by memory loss, there were several aspects of TVY we mused might strive to meet the needs of this specific audience, including brevity, sensory stimulation, flexibility in linear structure, and actor performances that could provide individual engagement curated in the moment. Eagerly, we began to put our plan into action.

It should be noted that, unlike the other two projects explored in previous chapters, the role of Teaching Artist as it pertains to this venture emphasizes the second half of the term: artist. Though Maria and I are both professional Teaching Artists by trade, this endeavor of experimenting with performing TVY for audiences with Alzheimer's and dementia was an application of our theoretical curiosity rather than a teaching facilitation. Regardless, the critical junctures explored below still prompted an excess of productive reflection and have heavily impacted my personal praxis and the way I approach my job as a Teaching Artist.

Critical Juncture #1: The Community Partner's Needs Come First

Maria and I knew that the first step to ensuring the success of this project would be to reach out to our pre-established community partner, Encore at Avalon (Encore), to gauge their interest. Having worked with them previously on *Come to the Table*, the Encore staff was eager to collaborate with us on another theatrical endeavor. It was imperative to us that we were transparent with our intentions and objectives being that this was a pilot project where we were uncertain of what the ultimate outcome would be. Would the audience of seniors be engaged? Would they challenge the childlike nature of the performance? Would our intuition as practitioners and researchers be met with success?

We initially proposed two individual performances for residents at Encore; the first would be a presentation of *When Pigs Fly* as initially developed for our very young audiences, and the second would be an adaptation of *Pigs* influenced by our findings from the first performance at Encore. This adapted version would stem from ensemble reflections following the initial performance, as well as feedback received from Encore staff. Upon meeting with event and community coordinators from Encore, we agreed that the two-performance model would be feasible and settled on potential performance dates. Due to unforeseen scheduling conflicts,

however, we were only able to secure a time for the first trial performance, and as such, the following section is a reflection of our findings from our initial performance at Encore.

We did encounter a moment where we considered inviting one of our original co-directors of *When Pigs Fly* to the performance at Encore who would have her four-month old son accompanying her. While we were excited to share the innovative ways in which we were expanding on this project, our director came forward and offered that inviting a young person, even just one, into the space could potentially shift the experience and influence the responses to the questions we had set out to answer. TVY is inherently intergenerational, as a young child can only come to the theatre when accompanied by an adult guardian. Thus, while the show is targeted to the very young, there is also an older generation in the room experiencing the performance often through the eyes of the young person they escort. As adults, there is an inherent joy in watching young people experience TVY. As such, we knew that bringing a baby into the space might redirect our intended senior audience's attention to enjoying the performance through his reactions and interactions rather than experiencing it for themselves.

Additionally, we were concerned about alienating our adult audience through the use of terms such as "Theatre for the Very Young." The last thing we wanted to do was insult anyone by making them feel belittled or babied, which can often be an emotional trigger for adults in assisted living facilities. Rather, we wanted to market this performance at Encore as an entirely new experience. We made efforts to re-frame the ways in which we were advertising the event by identifying the piece as a "theatrical experience rooted in play" and re-imagined the accompanying flyer, removing the animated artwork and the term "Theatre for the Very Young" to initiate a more mature feel. We discussed the content of the piece moment-by-moment to ensure that there was nothing that would come off as insensitive or condescending,

and ultimately decided to perform the piece as it had been written, as had been the original plan for our experimental project.

Though our intent was to share our piece only for an audience of residents from Encore's memory unit, our contacts at Encore requested that we extend the invitation to all residents. This initially gave us pause; our plan had been to perform *When Pigs Fly* as originally created for an audience with memory loss so that we could learn how to adapt our show to better suit the needs of an audience with Alzheimer's and dementia. We were concerned that performing for a larger and more neurodiverse audience would inhibit some of the potential discoveries to be made that would allow us to support our theories on the crossover between TVY and audiences with memory loss. Upon further discussion, however, *we realized that serving the needs of our welcoming community partner was a higher priority than serving our own needs as researchers in that particular moment.* Encore had been generous in allowing us to come into their space and try something completely new, so we felt it important to honor their request and share *When Pigs Fly* with whomever they wished. As such, our audience ended up being more neurodiverse than we had originally anticipated, but as it was a preliminary run with no intentional edits or corrections made to the performance, we were happy to welcome all fresh perspectives.

Though this instance of reflexive teaching artistry wasn't specifically curated in a classroom or in the midst of an in-class facilitation, it was still critical to the success of our experimental project. Had we not taken the time to reflect upon and re-prioritize the objectives of our proposed mission, we may have found ourselves back at square one with no community partner. Ultimately, it was most important for us to accommodate Encore's needs and their own objectives to provide for their residents. In doing so, we were still able to accomplish what it was

we set out to explore and supported the needs and desires of our community partner, ensuring a collaboration rooted in trust.

Critical Juncture #2: It's About Having Fun

Our performance of *When Pigs Fly* at Encore took place in a large, bright community room just off of the main lobby. This was not the first time we had taken *Pigs* to an alternate location from its original devising home at Orlando REP, and we quickly set to work determining how we would be utilizing our space. Adjustments were made for entrances and exits; while the show had originally been performed in a small blackbox theatre with a thrust stage (audience members seated on three of the four sides of the stage), the room we would be performing in at Encore was considerably more limiting in our use of space. There was no designated backstage area for actors to make exits and entrances except for a small holding room off to one side that connected to the kitchen. Additionally, whereas the blackbox was a fairly square, even-sided space, the room at Encore was far more rectangular, elongated from the front of the room to the back and narrower on either side. We knew we would be able to adapt to the space easily with some planning and set about discussing how to best utilize the room.

Previously, when performing for young people, we had laid out colorful gingham sheets of fabric on the floor, each designating a manageable-sized group for performers to engage throughout the performance. In the play, there are three farm “animals” in addition to a farmer and the protagonist, Avery the pig, each of whom is designated a specific swath of fabric and the young audience members who may be sat upon it. Typically, each gingham sheet could accommodate anywhere between eight to twelve young people. In this circumstance, however, the sheets of fabric were not nearly large enough to welcome more than two bulky wheelchairs, and we were concerned about the fabric getting caught in wheels and becoming hazardous. We

briefly spoke about cutting the fabric all together, concerned that placing it as a boundary at the edge of the “stage” might inhibit our audience from engaging with performers throughout the show. Ultimately, we decided that in some ways the fabric itself actually extended the invitation for audience members to engage and play alongside the performers. With previous performances all audience members were invited to sit on the floor, inherently making them feel as if they are part of the show, so how could we challenge ourselves to maintain that same connection and invitation with adults in chairs and wheelchairs? We compromised by laying out the fabrics, establishing the boundaries of our playing space and enhancing our barnyard environment without compromising the safety of our audience.

We had a limited amount of time to set up our space, and while we intended on “opening the house” half an hour before the start of the performance, nurses and aides needed significantly more time to ensure that all residents were in place to begin as planned. As such, we finished spacing *Pigs* and setting our environment as approximately fifty seniors and ten staff members made their way into the room, tampering with the pre-show theatrical magic that comes from entering a preset space. Would they resist buying into the playfulness of the show having watched five performers in costume rearranging scenery, discussing anticipated challenges, and verbally engaging with one another?

Our small ensemble of performers was visibly thrown by the obstacle of having our audience slowly ushered in before we had fully set our playing space. We tried squeezing into the tiny kitchen holding room, attempting to stay hidden from those being escorted into the space, but when we realized we had over forty minutes to stay squished like sardines, we thought better of it. Instead, we had to pause and ask ourselves, what are we truly losing if our audience sees the actors before the commencement of the performance? We never questioned whether or

not the audience would struggle to buy into the concept that four of our performers dressed in denim clothing were playing animals – why did we think that they would still be unable to suspend their disbelief once we started playing? *We had to refocus ourselves; the reason we were at Encore with Pigs was to see if offering a senior audience, including individuals with memory loss, a performative opportunity to play and experience “in-the-moment” theatre, had potential to be further explored. This was just the beginning of a greater hypothesis; we were there to have fun and extend an invitation to play.* Once we had relieved ourselves of the stress of having a perfected performance wherein everything went according to plan, we could take a collective deep breath and reconnect with our objective.

Teaching Artists are constantly faced with the question, which is more important: process or product? The educators in us value process, engaging students and guiding them as they develop skills and resources that help them grow as artists and individuals. The artists in us, however, tend to prioritize the quality of the finished product, or what is consumed by an audience. There is no right answer – product and process are equally valuable when it comes to Teaching Artistry, though emphasis on one or the other can shift depending on the project objective. For us, pausing to reflect on *why* we were at Encore with *When Pigs Fly* allowed us to view our performance, or product, as a process instead. Rather than getting caught up in the disappointment of a spoiled product, we needed to view the morning as an extension of our creative process. The joy of TVY doesn't lie in the moments that have been perfectly rehearsed, but rather the audience interactions that take performers by surprise. Half of the fun is the unpredictability itself. This last-minute recognition allowed us to let go of some of the pressures for perfection with which we were weighing ourselves down, and simply enjoy the experience that was to come.

Critical Juncture #3: Celebrate Your Audience for Who They Are

When Pigs Fly tells the story of Avery, a young pig, who sees a bird and decides to learn to fly. The show features several carefully crafted moments of discovery, wherein both characters and audience explore a new word representative of flight through interaction with a prop. Using objects such as balloons, kites, swaths of fabric, feathers, and a colorful parachute, Avery and his friends learn vocabulary such as “fly,” “float,” “soar,” and “lift.” Each of these discoveries in the show engage the audience viscerally, and it was critical to our initial idea to share TVY with an audience with memory loss that we maintain these moments of tangible connectivity.

By this point in time, we had already performed *When Pigs Fly* for several audiences of very young people and had come to expect specific reactions from them at moments throughout the show. Be it toddlers who would waddle up into our playing space unprompted or children who would react to the performers in fear, we felt confident in our ability to anticipate unplanned moments. While we had briefly discussed how some of those moments may look different with our Encore audience, it was mostly to the extent of being able to eradicate the expectation of audience members joining us onstage (due to mobility limitations) and perhaps more hesitancy to engage with performers when invited. The objective of this performance was, after all, to see how the audience may respond to the show as it was created for young people. We found, however, that there were far more instances of “in-the-moment” adaptation than we had initially anticipated. *Regardless of our plan to share the show in its original format, we quickly realized that we were, in fact, performing for an audience with different needs and expectations, and as an ensemble, we found ourselves collectively adjusting moments in the show to better suit the needs of our audience for who they were – seniors.*

Though we were unsure as to whether or not audience members would choose to engage alongside us, we were pleasantly surprised to find that minutes into the performance they began audibly commenting on what they were observing. Our show begins with each of our animal characters sleeping, and even with closed eyes, we could hear a chorus of “Aww’s”, “They’re sleeping,” and soft giggles and whispers throughout. This commentary would continue throughout the trajectory of the show; the seniors would share aloud what they predicted would happen next in the story and find ways of relating actions within the story to their own lives. There is a moment in the piece where Avery jumps in the air in an attempt to fly and ends up falling onto the floor. One audience member shouted out, “She fell on her butt!” while another retorted back with “I know how that feels.” Our ensemble of actors had little experience with audience commentary throughout our previous productions, however the audible responses from this new audience almost felt as if it were their way of letting us know they were ready to play.

The very first interactive moment of the piece is initiated with the introduction of the word “float,” accompanied with the reveal of a balloon. Avery models playing with the balloon by tapping it gently into the air, letting it fall onto his head and bopping it with his nose, demonstrating to audience members both its harmlessness and the potential it holds for play. Eventually, Avery turns to the audience and begins passing the balloon back and forth with each individual, providing a moment of one-on-one engagement. In our performance at Encore, we encouragingly found that most individuals participated, gently returning the balloon to Avery with a tap or a swat; but we also realized that with such a large audience, the wait time both before and after each individual’s balloon interaction with Avery became a dull, disengaging space. Some members of the audience fell in and out of sleep while others seemed restless as they could already anticipate that the moment would linger well past their interest. Though we

had previously shared *Pigs* with an audience of over fifty young people, the anticipation of when the balloon would make its way to them captivated young people in a way that failed to resonate with the seniors. Waiting for their turn and watching each other play didn't have the same sort of excitement and engagement as it did for young people.

Another moment that provided us with a great deal of reflection occurred when Avery offers a silky, colorful corner of fabric for each audience member to feel. At this performance, when Avery offered the fabric to only the third or fourth individual, they clung to it with an iron grip, creating an unscripted (though sweet and entertaining) game of tug-of-war. In hindsight, we realized from personal experience with Alzheimer's and dementia that one of the quirks of the disease is a desire to hold onto and/or hide objects. Because the show is non-verbal (aside from our token flight-themed vocabulary), the actress playing Avery had to use only her physicality, facial expressions, and a series of pig grunts to encourage the participant to release the fabric. Though the intent is to provide each audience member the opportunity to experience the sensation of the fabric, the performer, no longer feeling in control of the curated individual engagement, made the decision to jump back into the story and initiate the next moment. Having witnessed the challenging interaction, the ensemble was quick to follow the performer's lead and progress with the show.

One of the final moments in the piece invites audience members to join the performers in lifting a large parachute. In the original show, the performers attempt to lift the parachute, but soon realize that the key to successfully completing the task calls for the aid of the audience members. Young people are intentionally selected and gathered around the parachute to assist. This particular moment was one that our ensemble had taken the time to address prior to performing for the seniors, as we wanted to be mindful of the fact that not all of our audience

members would be mobile. We originally anticipated lifting the parachute around audience members so that they would have the opportunity to enjoy the sensory experience of the breeze created by the parachute rising and falling without them physically handling the parachute. In the moment, however, the seniors acknowledged and honored our previous invitations to play by reaching out for the parachute, asking to participate. One of the beautiful things about TVY is the ways in which the audience becomes an integral character in the performance, and by reaching for the traveling parachute, the seniors were in essence offering us a character choice that we, as their fellow performers, acknowledged and accepted. The ensemble compromised by encouraging seniors to take hold of a parachute handle several people at a time, rotating the parachute as it made its way across our horseshoe-shaped audience in an almost ferris-wheel-like maneuver.

The last interactive moment in our story involves an invitation to the audience to gather feathers dropped by the chicken character and place them in Avery's hair - the thought being, with feathers, Avery will be able to fly. With our original audience of young people, the moment transitions directly from the parachute interaction, meaning that participants stay in the playing space with the other characters as the chicken briskly molts her feathers around the stage until it is time to collect and adorn Avery with the feathers. For our audience of seniors, however, we had to find another way to engage individuals with the feathers, as no one had physically moved to our playing space. Instead, the chicken tossed feathers directly into the audience, making sure that each individual received at least one, and Avery then followed, allowing each person to place a feather in a pocket or her hair. Another performer accompanied Avery as the actor made her way throughout the audience, assisting individuals with limited mobility as they made one last effort to help him fly.

In a typical TVY *When Pigs Fly* performance, students enter a space where the performers are already in character, and at the conclusion of the show their last interaction with the performers is also in character, as we have made the creative decision to forgo any kind of curtain call that disrupts the world of the drama. With this performance, however, the seniors had already been privy to our backstage preparation, so we felt comfortable engaging with them out of character as they left the space. Usually we collect the feathers to be reused in the next show, but with this particular audience, we noticed that some individuals had kept the feathers and were petting them or placing them in their hair, as Avery had modeled. We made a spontaneous decision to leave the feathers with residents, allowing us one more opportunity to engage our audience by handing out feathers as they were being escorted from the space and back to their rooms. For us, these parting gifts expressed our gratitude for being welcomed into their space and represented the play and creativity we had shared as an ensemble that afternoon.

Despite coming into the space with every intention to keep the show as previously performed, our audience needed a *different* performance. It would have been insensitive to proceed with *When Pigs Fly* without making the specific in-the-moment adjustments that we did; in fact, it may have bordered on being exclusive of our audience. The last thing we ever wanted to do was make anyone sharing in the experience of *Pigs* feel unwelcome in any way. I believe it was our background as Teaching Artists and our ability to practice reflexive teaching that gave us the tools and confidence to make the split-second adjustments that we did. Being TVY practitioners may have prepared us for unexpected audience engagement, but it was personal praxis that ultimately allowed us the flexibility to be clever in-the-moment theatre-makers.

Conclusion

While we have not yet had the opportunity to apply what we learned from our performance at Encore to create an adaptation specifically to suit the needs of an audience with memory loss, we undoubtedly believe in the power of performing TVY for individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. One of the most rewarding elements of performing *When Pigs Fly* for both very young audiences and audiences with Alzheimer's and dementia is the ability to honor and engage each individual in the audience, regardless of age. It positions audience members as experts in the space, encouraging them to discover alongside Avery and become an integral part of the journey. Though *Pigs* was created to serve one marginalized demographic (the very young), its roots in play allowed us to creatively reimagine its potential to serve another underserved audience.

The experience of performing *When Pigs Fly* for a memory-affected audience affirmed many of our initial theories; sharing a show that celebrates interactivity and creates a space for verbal, physical, and sensory engagement allowed our senior audience to become an active part of our performance rather than passive observers. In our post-show reflection, our ensemble of performers reflected upon the agency that *Pigs* provided our audience, allowing them to choose when, how, and to what extent they engaged with our performance. This observation parallels our reflections from performing for the very young, and the opportunity to embrace play and find ownership in art are primary motivating factors for our work.

As we think about our next performance of *When Pigs Fly* for audiences with memory loss, not only are we eager to identify how the audience responds to our adjustments, but also to discover the answers to some new guiding questions, such as, How can we continue to push ourselves to create an even more individualized experience for this audience as we become more familiar with their needs? How might young audiences and audiences with memory loss compare

neurologically, and what research do we have to support our theories? How might bringing young people into the space to share the experience together shift the seniors' engagement? For the purposes of our continued research, we also hope to narrow down our audience to Encore residents specifically living in their memory unit, while also honoring ways in which we can better serve the Encore community as a whole.

TVY is rapidly becoming more mainstream because of its ability to truly honor the needs of its audience. We believe it has the power to recognize that all people deserve to experience art for the entirety of their lives, and this new work with seniors showcases that you never stop being deserving of creating and engaging with art. As practitioners, we are challenging the boundaries of TVY by testing its ability to engage and sustain us creatively well into the later stages of our lives. It is our hope that our continued work in this new field is a step forward in honoring seniors with memory loss for the human beings they are, deserving of engagement, theatre, and above all else, community.

While this experience does emphasize our work as artists, it is our reflexive practice that allows this project to continue to grow and evolve. We may not always have the luxury to reflect upon our practice at the end of the day and take the time to apply it to our next class or rehearsal. The critical junctures that shape our praxis are sometimes implemented quickly and with little time to plan. In this circumstance, as we rejoice in theatre that celebrates being in-the-moment, it makes perfect sense that the application of our reflections would need to be just as instantaneous. Performing *Pigs* for our senior audience also allowed me to use the skills I have gained as a reflexive Teaching Artist to strengthen my work as a theatre-maker. It has proven to me that my identity in the field of the performing arts will always be rooted in the balance between education and artistry, where I can constantly challenge myself creatively and pedagogically.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Reflexive Teaching Artistry: A Reflection

A true Teaching Artist never stops learning. Every project, class, collaboration, and creative process has something to teach. Reflection is the most effective way we can take note of the challenges and successes of an experience and reassess how we might facilitate or organize differently in the future. Critical junctures, the valuable “lightbulb” moments that arise throughout a creative process, allow a Teaching Artist to acknowledge changes that need to be made to better serve their students. If for any reason, a program objective isn’t being met, then it is the responsibility of the Teaching Artist to reevaluate what could be done differently to better meet the needs of the project and its participants.

One of the beautiful things about critical junctures is that the lessons they impart carry over from one endeavor to another. The things we learn on one project undoubtedly inform how we approach the next. For example, learning to let go of my self-inflicted creative boundaries throughout *Come to the Table* undeniably helped me be a more flexible performer during *When Pigs Fly*; learning to let go of what “should be” (because that’s how it was *planned* or *rehearsed*) allowed me to embrace the uncertainty of creativity and approach my art with an open mind. Reconnecting to *Come to the Table*’s program objective reminded me during the MPAI study that I needed to prioritize the well-being and engagement of our participants in order to support the research and its outcome. Rejecting the stigma of Alzheimer’s and dementia in our class space during the MPAI study made bringing *When Pigs Fly* to Encore to perform for an audience with memory loss drastically easier because we had no fear in addressing the disease and asking questions about our audience’s needs in regard to their comprehensive challenges. Learning from

the trials and triumphs of previous projects makes us stronger leaders and more adept Teaching Artists.

Not only do Teaching Artists have the power to reflect upon their own work, but they also have the ability to encourage reflection in their participants. In *The Reflexive Teaching Artist*, Dawson and Kelin state, “Drama/theatre learning experiences – whatever the application, focus or setting – provide ample opportunities for participants to carefully reflect on their actions, beliefs, life experiences and connections to their community and society” (Dawson 9). Teaching Artists can easily facilitate post-class reflections by prompting students to think about moments that challenged or surprised them throughout the day. We can also stimulate personal growth by pushing students to reflect beyond “what happened” to consider questions such as, why did this happen? How did you make it happen? Why do you think it was or was not successful? What did you learn from this? How can you apply what you have learned for next time? Knowing what you know now, what goals can you set for yourself? By setting students up to apply their reflections to their own future practice, we are implementing the fundamentals of reflexive teaching and helping them become stronger critical thinkers, artists, and individuals.

Acknowledging privilege is critical to practicing reflexive teaching artistry. By recognizing where you stand and what societal and social advantages you may have, you are better able to develop curriculum that is empathetic, intentional, and inclusive for participants who may not experience the same advantages. Without acknowledging your own privilege, it is easy to potentially alienate your student body, as evidenced in our experience with the curriculum for the MPAI research study – having been crafted by able-bodied individuals, the lesson plans often estranged less-mobile participants. In order to create a safe space and establish a sense of trust and collaboration, we must identify how our own thought processing may differ

from others' due to circumstances outside our control. As Teaching Artists, we may not know the conditions of a student's home life, or the dynamics of their family or community. The ability to anticipate how our own perspective and privilege may contrast to those in our classrooms and rehearsal halls makes us more aware of the needs of our students, allowing us to develop more deliberate curriculums and invite all perspectives into a singular shared creative space.

There are many Teaching Artists in the world, and we all bring fresh perspectives and unique methodologies to our classrooms. What sets us apart most, however, is how we interpret our individual core values in regard to our curriculum development and facilitation. I firmly believe in the importance of crafting a safe playing space where play and creative ideas are encouraged and celebrated without fear of judgement or failure. The tactics that create a safe playing space for one group of students, however, may not be the right fit for the next group. For example, while a class of preschoolers may only need a game or two to establish a playful learning environment, older students may feel more protected with the creation of a collaborative community agreement establishing the expectations of a safe space. Practicing reflexive teaching artistry allows me to adjust my approach to developing a supportive and encouraging ensemble for each project as an individual event. It means that, in the moment, if I sense the safety of our creative space is compromised, I can quickly adjust to the needs of the room and reconfigure my facilitation to support the need for trust and ensemble-building. For me, this is reflexive praxis at its finest.

TYA for Adults

As theatre practitioners in TYA, we often feel like the work we do is perceived as being intended to serve one specific audience; young people. In my work, however, I have found that many of the skills I've acquired while teaching young people are also highly beneficial for

working with adults, particularly those with Alzheimer's and dementia. The majority of the work explored in this thesis is centered around the creation of new material, be it devising, improvisation, or audience interaction. Working on original content not only provides students with pride and agency in their imagination, but also allows for the freedom to adapt and edit in the moment. This is ideal for individuals who may struggle with traditional theatre requirements such as memorization, like our demographic of participants with memory loss. The self-confidence required to make a bold choice in an improv game is the same for everyone regardless of age, as is the resulting gratification. The older we get, the more counterintuitive it is for us to be silly, particularly in public, and the methods I have learned to encourage young people to embrace their goofiness are also successful when used with adults. For example, modeling silly, goofy behavior as a Teaching Artist equalizes students and invites them to do the same, be they adults or young people.

As Teaching Artists, we understand the importance of providing young people with opportunities for self-expression, ensemble-building, and social development. We are advocates for arts education and the opportunities it provides for our children. But why don't we advocate for arts education for adults in the same way? Young people inherently need adults to obtain access to the arts; whether purchasing tickets or enrolling for classes and workshops, adults are the decision-makers on behalf of young people when it comes to art accessibility. But even when we reach an age where we become responsible for our own engagement in the arts, we hardly ever see adults encouraged to continue their arts education. Careers in theatre and music are seen as frivolous and impractical. The arts may make decent hobbies, but are financially irresponsible, so why put time and effort into the craft? Teaching Artists have a unique opportunity to advocate

for arts education not only for young people, but for *all* people. This is where my work comes into play.

Throughout the opportunities discussed in this thesis, I have witnessed firsthand the impact that the performing arts can have on adults, particularly those affected in some way by Alzheimer's and dementia. The moments of connectivity between care partners throughout the MPAI study were undeniably positive, as was the palpable sense of community that developed over time. The audience members of *When Pigs Fly* that engaged with our performers throughout the show may not have been able to recall the moment of interactivity later but were so present in the moment as they played alongside us. Although not specifically afflicted by memory loss, our *Come to the Table* seniors were so willing to welcome our students into their home and were thrilled to see their time together reflected onstage in our *Come to the Table* performance. The social and communal benefits of these projects are undeniable, and my extensive reflection upon them further incites passion to continue to create meaningful theatrical experiences for adults utilizing the tools I have learned as a TYA practitioner. I also encourage other Teaching Artists in our field to ask themselves, how are we challenging ourselves as theatre-makers to use our skills to serve theatrically underserved demographics? How can the theatre we create intentionally for one audience be adapted to suit the needs of another?

Why Does it Matter?

Engaging communities through the arts has become a mission for many theatrical organizations. Now more than ever, vulnerable populations such as young people and seniors, are in need of programming that stimulates creative growth and fosters empathy and connectivity. The common uniqueness of the three projects discussed in this document is the ability to engage participants in content creation and build a safe space in which to contribute

new ideas. *Come to the Table* was built directly from the stories and interactions exchanged between the seniors and students. The MPAI project allowed participants to jump into improvisational activities and take agency in making individual choices. *When Pigs Fly* invited senior audiences to engage with an interactive performance in ways that felt natural and comfortable, ultimately shaping the outcome of the show. Participants' contributions in all three projects were essential to meeting each program's objectives and also provided space for personal creative investment in both the process and the product.

The theory of co-creativity is becoming more prevalent in arts-based classrooms and programming around the world. In the article "Co-Creativity in Playful Classroom Activities," author Alexander Schmoelz expounds upon the idea of co-creativity, stating "Co-creativity is specifically human, life wide and happens in and between us. Co-creativity is constituted in individual, collaborative and communal thinking and action that is wise and humanizing and evolves through emotive lateral thinking, dialogue and shared actions" (Schmoelz 32). Schmoelz's description emphasizes the importance of togetherness in co-creativity; without working as a collaborative unit, there can be no co-creativity. *Come to the Table*, the MPAI study, and *When Pigs Fly* model the relevancy of togetherness, and I believe it was the common ability to build a creative community that led to the success of each project. The moments of magic that happened, as Schmoelz describes as "in and between us" ultimately defined the achievements of all three projects and position them in our field as effective examples of the ways in which our communities can truly benefit from programming that emphasizes co-creativity.

Now more than ever, we have the ability to empower our communities through their creative contributions. Creating art for marginalized demographics is a noble and important

mission, but we can further benefit participants by inviting them into the creative space and allowing them to share their perspectives and voices. By doing so, we build a fellowship founded in empathy, awareness, and creative expression as we learn how we can best value each member of our communities. As the Teaching Artists at the forefront of designing and facilitating these programs, we have the unique ability to engage underserved individuals and begin to build the bridges that will connect populations who may not otherwise have the opportunity to engage with one another. Reflexive Teaching Artistry is a tremendous tool in cultivating the success of such programs. The ability to immediately apply reflections to individual praxis allows Teaching Artists to ensure they are meeting the needs of as many participants as possible, supporting both project objectives and the creativity of all involved. The flexibility that comes from practicing Reflexive Teaching Artistry is imperative to successful co-creativity, and an awareness of personal reflection and the application of those reflections to facilitation ensure that everyone's voice is heard and every story is honored. At the heart of every co-creative endeavor is an open-minded Teaching Artist who is ready to serve and learn alongside their students.

Moving Forward

So, what comes next?

For me, I hope to continue pushing myself to discover new teaching methodologies to implement throughout my practice. I intend to be vigilant in my reflection routine, consistently pausing to ask myself, am I meeting the objective of my project? Am I best serving my students? What could I be doing to more openly encourage play and ensemble-building? I also plan to impart reflective skills to my students so that they may begin to develop their own unique praxis and develop their individual perspectives as theatre-makers.

My work as a TVY practitioner has not only taught me the value of play, but also of celebrating being in-the-moment. As Dr. Anne Davis Basting's work exemplifies, the utilization of drama conventions that focus on creating in-the-moment theatre are ideal for individuals with memory loss. It is my hope that I will be able to continue to experiment with the crossover between TVY and audiences with Alzheimer's and dementia. In addition to examining how we might continue to engage older audiences with pieces originally created for the very young, I also intend to apply what we learned about the needs of our audience at Encore to design original theatre intentionally created for audiences with memory loss.

While the importance of reflecting as a Teaching Artist may seem obvious to some, those who practice reflexive teaching artistry know that it is a skill that requires patience, effort, and forgiveness. It takes strength to look back at your work in an attempt to find the moments where you could have made better choices or reacted differently. If you have the open-mindedness to view reflection as a superior form of self-improvement, however, it can be one of the most beneficial forms of learning available. The application of our reflections to our practice, then, only makes us stronger practitioners and Teaching Artists. Reflexive teaching artistry has proven invaluable to my own practice, and I view every opportunity to work as a Teaching Artist as a chance to grow. With dedication, reflexive teaching artistry has crafted my practice into an active, breathing praxis which will continue to evolve with every new reflection.

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