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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Stories We Tell:

Affective Expressivity in the Formation of Reality and Identity in Theatre-Based Therapies

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Drama and Theatre

by

Carly Amber Shaw

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Bryan Reynolds, Chair
Professor Anthony Kubiak
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2025

DEDICATION

To

My family and friends for their unfailing support
and those this work might help.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
VITA	vii
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	x
INTRODUCTION: Creation in Crisis	1
CHAPTER 1: Pieces at Play: Ameliorating Affective Overwhelm through Devised Theatre Processes	33
Theatrical, Therapeutic Third Spaces	36
Dramatic Deconstruction of Subjectivity	50
Affective, Exploratory Distance in Theatrical Processes	61
Working Through in Theatrical Processes	68
Coda: Dialogic Performance as Planes of Negotiation	82
CHAPTER 2: Reckless Reframing: Reconstructions of Reality through Transversal Temporalities and Trauma-Informed Theatre	83
Beyond the Boundaries of Reality	88
Yes, And: Perceptual Improvisation	105
Rehearsing Radical Realities	116
Coda: Rehearsing and Reintegrating Realities	127
CHAPTER 3: Braving the Storm: Self-Negotiation through the Collaborative Creation of Therapeutic Performance	131
To Be or Not to Be: Exploratory Construction of the Self	135

Cultural Codifications of Self	147
You Say, I Say	161
Rest in the Mess: Creative Implications within Adolescent Affective Dimensions	172
Self-Determination in the Midst of Mess	178
Coda: Reflection through Expression	183
CONCLUSION: Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Future Directions of Therapeutic Theatre Work	185
BIBLIOGRAPHY	206

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1	Asklepion Clinic of Epidaurus 6
Figure 2	Students participate at the National Theatre’s Speak Up Celebration 48
Figure 3	MCC’s <i>Uncensored: Shake the Room</i> 64
Figure 4	MCC’s <i>Uncensored: Shake the Room</i> 72
Figure 5	Leicester Speak Up Celebration 76
Figure 6	MCC’s <i>Uncensored: Shake the Room</i> 78
Figure 7	Connections Festival 2019: Variations and Flesh at the National Theatre 93
Figure 8	Connections Festival 2019: Variations and Flesh at the National Theatre 99
Figure 9	Detroit Creativity Project uses improv to teach youth life skills 114
Figure 10	Havering Speak Up Celebration 124
Figure 11	Speak Up Living Mural 142
Figure 12	Adolescents Adopt the Role of their Parents 164
Figure 13	A mess, A total mess 168
Figure 14	My Brain is like My Bedroom 180

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Stories We Tell:
Affective Expressivity in the Formation of Reality and Identity in Theatre-Based Therapies

by

Carly Amber Shaw

Doctor of Philosophy in Drama and Theatre

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Professor Bryan Reynolds, Chair

This dissertation investigates the therapeutic potential of devised theatre as a means of ameliorating affective overwhelm in adolescents. Drawing from case studies of the UK National Theatre’s *Speak Up* program, Company3’s *Brainstorm* and Manhattan Class Company’s *Uncensored* series, among others, it examines how collaborative, embodied, and process-driven theatrical creation enables young participants to articulate and renegotiate overwhelming affective experiences that often resist verbal expression. The study situates devised theatre within a liminal “third space” between creative expression and therapeutic practice, foregrounding the role of play, fragmentation, and transversal movement across temporal, spatial, and subjective boundaries. Through analysis informed by theorists including Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and Jung, it argues that theatrical processes—particularly those privileging openness, multiplicity, and participant agency—facilitate the externalization, exploration, and reframing of distressing affect without reducing it to fixed meaning or narrative closure. The research further contends that maintaining processual openness, resisting premature codification into script, and fostering dialogic performance sustain ongoing therapeutic engagement beyond the staged production. Ultimately, collaboratively created theatre emerges as a dynamic, participatory methodology for empowering adolescents to explore alternative subjectivities, exercise creative agency, and

negotiate complex affective topographies in ways that affirm rather than constrain their lived experiences and the sense of identity they come to create.

Introduction: Creation in Crisis

In Leicester's Curve Theatre, the air vibrates with overlapping sounds of beatboxing from one room, spoken word from another, the clang of stage combat swords just down the hall. Students dart between workshops, carrying fragments of memories, movement, rhythm, and story from one space to the next. They rehearse fear, reshape anger, and experiment with joy. As an outsider, it is overwhelming. As a researcher, it is inspiring. These events, as celebrations of the National Theatre's Speak Up program, are not defined by overly polished performances for a paying audience but by the living laboratories where adolescents explore what it means to speak up, whether through words or actions, about the lived experiences that overwhelm them. In these rehearsal rooms, mental health struggles, community tensions, and questions of safety are not abstract topics but embodied realities that are rehearsed and reshaped through play. These processes — unpredictable, messy, and resistant to closure at their core — capture the heart of collaboratively created theatre as therapeutic praxis. Within the liminal, theatrical arena, affective overwhelm is not contained but given space to move, change, and connect. Steeped in moments of exploratory potential, a central question emerged: when the aim is healing, is the value found in the final performance, or in the collective, unpredictable act of making it?

Historical Background

Trauma is often understood as a “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind,” which constitutes a fragmentation of the “mind’s experience of time, self, and the world.”¹ By

¹ Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016, 4.

this estimation, trauma remains rooted in the body as an unfinished response to a threat that has been faced. One's inability to fully comprehend and, thus, respond to a disturbing experience engenders a "stuckness" in which the traumatic experience seems to lodge itself in the mind and the body of the individual, arousing overdeveloped or underdeveloped reactions to future threats as one fails to process the associated affect effectively and fully. Though bodily wounds inflicted on an individual in the initial moment of impact may leave behind physical scars, the far more pertinent psychological implications are the fissures that mar the perspectival position that the young adolescent occupies as they attempt to navigate their broader environment. The psychological wounds emerge out of disturbing or distressing encounters that are experienced too unexpectedly or rapidly to be consciously understood or felt in their entirety. As a result, the encounter "imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors."² Despite the perceived singular, definitive impact of traumatic events, the continuous psychological implications necessitate perception of trauma that are structured around multiple complex emotions and ideas that may "be likened to a psychic wound," to borrow Jung's terminology.³

Yet, despite attempts to solidify a determinate definition of trauma, a question persists throughout: "Is trauma that which disappears, or that which persists?"⁴ Historical estimations of trauma are derived from an etymological understanding of the Greek word trauma (τραύμα), meaning trauma wound, as it borrows from both the Greek *titrōskein*, meaning to wound, and the

² Ibid.

³ Jung, C. G. "The Question of The Therapeutic Value of 'Abreaction.'" *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 1, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1921, pp. 13–22, doi:10.1111/j.2044-8341.1921.tb00342.x, 130.

⁴ Haughton, Miriam. *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53663-1>, 3.

Greek tetrainein, meaning to pierce the tissue of the body.⁵ Though the historical etymology of the term is oriented toward a physical wound, contemporary definitions have shifted to center on an “emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of a loved one, war, and more.”⁶ Given the magnitude of occurrences that can, and do, elicit traumatic responses, attempts to solidify a singular definition of trauma negate its personal effects across difference. As individuals come to terms with the disparate factors that “cause very different outcomes for two people witnessing the same event,” their categorical estimations of trauma aid in the illumination of the “complexity of both events and methodology” as incommensurable visions coexist.⁷ Inability to reconcile these seemingly contradictory perspectives, including pre- and post-trauma subjectivity, often results in emergent traumatic neuroses in which the unavoidable yet inarticulatory affective dimensions of an encounter impose themselves on the mind.

With the improved comprehension of the complexity of traumatic experiences and the means by which they are defined, the development of trauma-informed practices that respond to the complex physical and psychological implications of trauma is necessary. Early approaches to trauma recovery emphasize the individual, clinical interventions with movement towards the integration of traumatic effects into one’s everyday life.⁸ With the expansive recognition of

⁵ Kolaitis, Gerasimos, and Miranda Olf. “Psychotraumatology in Greece.” *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, vol. 8, no. 4, 27 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1351757>, 1; “Wound - Etymology, Origin & Meaning.” Etymonline, www.etymonline.com/word/wound. Accessed 2 Aug. 2025.

⁶ *American Psychological Association*, American Psychological Association, 2024, www.apa.org/topics/trauma.

⁷ Rousseau, Module 1: Introduction to Trauma; quoted in Rousseau, Danielle. “A Brief History of Trauma and PTSD.” *A Brief History of Trauma and PTSD Comments*, 1 Jan. 1969, sites.bu.edu/daniellerousseau/2024/08/11/a-brief-history-of-trauma-and-ptsd/; Rothberg, Michael. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 6.

⁸ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). “Appendix C, Historical Account of Trauma,” *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services: A Treatment Improvement Protocol*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014.

complex trauma histories and their contemporary implications, therapeutic approaches that further integrate psychosocial dimensions and empowerment models blur the line between individual therapy and group therapy. While these second-wave therapeutic approaches are not intended to replace personal therapy in its entirety, the recontextualization of the individual experience within a collective establishes a network of support through which alternative perspectives of traumatic encounters can be explored. Bearing in mind these distinctive waves of approaches to trauma recovery, the relational dynamics between therapeutic techniques and theatrical performance emerge as an approach, grounded in historical practices, which addresses both individual and collective experiences of trauma.

Historical Healing: Understanding the Relationship between Theatre and Therapy

Reenactment of events that have been designated traumatic by those who experience them first-hand prompts the reexperience of affect that has already been felt but not fully comprehended. Marvin Carlson posits that these reenacted events are the “the stories [theatre] chooses to tell, the bodies and other physical materials it utilizes to tell them, and the places in which they are told.”⁹ The relationship proposed between interiority and expressive performance supports the hypothesis that dramatic interventions, particularly with adolescent populations, liberate the stories through which one perceives the past from the mundane, restrictive codification often attributed by adult subjectivities. Theatrical processes, instead, seek to “express truths that lie beneath the surface” of adolescent perspectives and “bring people to a deeper understanding of themselves and others.”¹⁰ The capacity to interpret and understand

⁹ Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002. Print, 3.

¹⁰ Emunah, Renee. *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance*. 2nd edition., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, 263.

encounters, to “catch the conscious” through embodied memory, accounts for the shifts in subjective positions that occur over time as adolescents are temporally removed from the initial event.¹¹ As the individual storyteller engages in a process of theatrical “ghosting,” the reciprocal influence of past events and the contemporary moment promotes the continuous negotiation of one’s perceptual understanding of past and present reality and the roles they occupy within it that proves therapeutic in its own right.

Founded on a historical precedent, the power of early storytelling illuminates the correlation between complex expressions and traumatic recovery that is evident in the spatial relationship between the Asklepieion Clinic, a site with temples and hospital buildings devoted to the healing gods of ancient Greece, and the Theatre of Epidauros, esteemed as the perfect ancient Greek theatre with regard to acoustics and aesthetics. Though little is written about the Clinic itself, the healing work of the Asklepius, a fifth-century Athenian hero or god deemed the “blameless physician,” often foregrounds artistic methodology, including the writing of odes, songs, and ‘comical mimes,’ as treatment sought to deepens an “Athenian audience’s sensitivity to a dramatic poet’s deployment” of poetry or storytelling within the interior theatre of the clinic.¹² Given that the clinic in Epidauros, as the international center of the Asklepios cult, is positioned between two theatrical spaces, one within the walls of the clinic itself and one situated in a valley below the clinic, theatrical aesthetics seem inherently intertwined with the very essence of the therapeutic site. Though Epidauros is perhaps the most notable example of the relationship between clinic and theatre, the situation of Asklepieia near theaters is notably so

¹¹ Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 2; Quoted in Carlson, 4.

¹² Mitchell-Boyask, Robin. “The Pharmacy of Euripides: Asclepius and the Theater of Dionysus.” *Asclepius and the Theater of Dionysus*, 6 Apr. 1996, stockton.edu/hellenic-studies/documents/chs-summaries/mitchell-boyask96.pdf, 2; Melfi, Milena. “Ritual Spaces and Performances in the Asklepieia of Roman Greece.” *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, Cambridge Univ Press, 2010.

common that the relationship between healing, music, and theater are often perceived as synonymous.¹³ This close proximity between a space of healing and a space of theatricality transforms the latter into a locus of therapy for the public. Constructed sometime around 350 B.C.E, Lutz Keppel notes that the pentagram-shaped architecture of the Epidaurian theater, which further punctuates the potential for healing within the theatrical space, in his conclusion that the pentagram forms part of the mathematical harmonies of the theater as a whole. It is this harmony that Keppel credits for eliciting the Greek Hygieia, meaning health, a fundamental idea of the theater of Asklepios. By Keppel's estimation, the "theater itself can cure."¹⁴

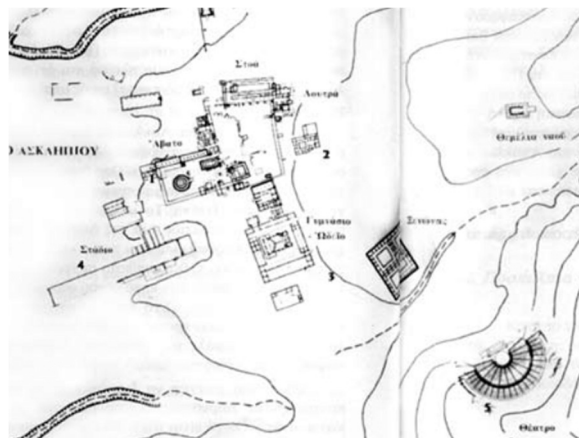


Fig. 1. Asklepieion Clinic of Epidauros, Reprinted and adapted from Asklepios kai Asklepieia

[Asclepius and Asclepieia], by Aravadinos AP, 1907.

Thus, the theatre does not stand in direct proximity to the Asklepios shrines or clinics for the purpose of providing access to plays during the course of their treatment. Rather, it was a

¹³ Some other examples of the close proximity between Asklepieion Clinics and theatres are as follows: Beginning with a late example, at Pergamon, the Hellenistic theater lies near an Asklepieion dating back to 400 B.C. At Corinth, the theater lies closer (350 meters) to the Asklepieion than any other of the major civic structures. In Athens, the Theater of Dionysus may have received extensive reconstruction during the Peace of Nicias (421-16), which was also the time of the Asklepieion's construction; Mitchell-Boyask, 5.

¹⁴ Keppel, 102; quoted in Mitchell-Boyask, 5.

common thought among pilgrims seeking healing at the sanctuary that performances held at theatres like the one in Epidaurus were an integral part of the healing process. Therapeutic processes in Western tradition, from the Greek *therapeia* which means ‘healing,’ follow in the tradition of rituals intended to praise to Apollo and Asklepius as well as in the theatrical “traditions including and far preceding the Ancient Greek notions of catharsis,” or the complete expulsion of traumatic, affective dimensions.¹⁵ Establishment of a pre-catharsis precedent constitutes a therapeutic, theatrical technique not intended to expel distressing affect but to integrate those rituals and stories that are expressed externally into one’s perceptual subjectivity.

Charting the Development of Alternative Therapeutic Approaches

Historical underpinnings of the relationship between theatre and therapy continue to influence the development of contemporary techniques, particularly those involving adolescent participants. As these techniques develop, consideration of affect as a predominant component of adolescent emotional well-being and expression becomes exceedingly important. Incorporation of the two paradigms, theatre and therapy, constitutes core therapeutic processes that are rooted in fundamental principles of performative expressivity like plays, tales, or myths (Gersie, 1997; Jenkyns, 1996; Jennings & Minde, 1993; Jennings, 1998), scene work and dramatized personal stories (Emunah, 1993, 1994), roles (Landy, 1993, 2000, 2001), ritual structures (Grainger, 1990; Jennings, 1994; Mitchel, 1994; Snow, 2000), improvised transformations (Johnson, 2000), or projective tools alongside more advanced techniques such as Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the

¹⁵ Mitchell, Roanna. “Not Not Doing Therapy: Performer Training and the ‘third’ Space.” *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2022, pp. 222–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2052173>, 225.

Oppressed.¹⁶ These foundational, theatrical principles generate a counter-hegemonic gateway through which traditional therapeutic processes are decentered in favor of more creative pursuits.

Creative arts therapists resist restrictive talk therapies in favor of interventions that integrate multiplicitous approaches. Theatrical therapies have taken on varied forms that seek to express past experiences as moldable materials for the development of self-awareness and resilience. Psychodrama is a performative methodology that aids in the exploration of distressing affect through improvised enactments which serve as “a series of scenes in an unfolding play.”¹⁷ In method and theory, psycho-dramatic processes are not mutually exclusive but, as Adam Blatner posits in *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*, may be continuously revised, adapted, and integrated into broader therapeutic operations. However, Blatner himself insists that the challenge of psychodrama is its necessitation of a three-fold procedural framework: warming up, the action, and sharing. While this structured approach is, to some extent, restrictive, elements of the technique evoke play in a manner that fosters “insight, rehearsal, and exploration” through reflection and reenactment.¹⁸ In the aftermath of the work, entrance into the phase of sharing facilitate encounters wherein participants are “encouraged to talk about what there was in their own lives that might resonate with what they witnessed happening in the protagonist’s situation” instead of analysis.¹⁹ Yet, the

¹⁶ Pendzik, Susana. “On Dramatic Reality and Its Therapeutic Function in Drama Therapy.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2006, pp. 271–80, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2006.03.001>, 271; Harden, Troy, et al. “The Truth N’ Trauma Project: Addressing Community Violence Through a Youth-Led, Trauma-Informed and Restorative Framework.” *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2015, pp. 65–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-014-0366-0>, 68.

¹⁷ Blatner, Adam, and Daniel J. Wiener. *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*. iUniverse Inc., 2007, 153.

¹⁸ Ibid., 160.

¹⁹ Ibid., 161.

reliance of this stage on closure calls into question the use of psycho-dramatic techniques alone in therapeutic processes.

Conversely, drama therapy, as articulated by Phil Jones in *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living*, builds on the Freudian notion that created productions are formed from unconscious elementary impulses and Jung's definition of therapy as developing the latent creative possibilities of the subject, while centering around the drive to "aid in remediation, rehabilitation, or personal or social adjustment" through dramatic intervention."²⁰ Jones offers a vast array of techniques that gesture towards the creative capacity of a subject that, when employed, allows the subject to take on an alternative identity. Through adoption of the other as self, the individual may begin the process of working-through their traumatic experience and transform them without the fear of being retraumatized through the projection of one's feelings and experiences onto another person entirely separate yet intrinsically connected to them within a safe playing space.²¹ Jones lays the foundation for the development of dramatic, embodied forms of therapy that necessitate the engagement of both body and mind. The creative embodiment inherent in drama therapy facilitates the re-experiencing of an unconscious experience in an ambiguous space of transversal play and, consequently, engenders the communication, both gesturally and linguistically, of the trauma that they have faced that remains hidden within the body and mind.

The historical development of drama therapy, however, has been limited to the clinical explication of theatrical techniques that may aid in the therapeutic process. Yet, it stops short of a complete understanding of the theoretical, hermeneutic, and psychological underpinnings of the field while, at the same time, failing to situate this discussion in the realm of child

²⁰ Irwin 23; quoted in Jones, Phil. *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living*, Routledge, 1996, 5.

²¹ The terms that have been set forth by discussions of trauma, i.e., client, subject, etc., seem far too clinical and impersonal to me; yet, I have been unable to find an alternative. It is my hope that, through this project, I may come to find an alternative term that more accurately represents an individual in the therapeutic process.

development and therapy, though some do. Those scholars who do approach child-specific drama therapy, like Hanna Kende in *Psychodrama with Children: Healing Children through Their Own Creativity*, seek to aid in each person's individual task of "perfecting [themselves] starting from [their] own history while battling against numerous difficulties that she will have to confront."²² Yet, this search for perfection fails to take full advantage of the arguably messy but ultimately productive transversality of drama therapy.

A key theoretical principle in the work of Felix Guattari, transversality is a "dimension that tries to overcome both the impasse of pure verticality and that of mere horizontality: it tends to be achieved when there is maximum communication among different levels and, above all, different meanings."²³ What Guattari gestures at here is the facilitation of improvisatory experimentation which, in turn, aids in the transformation of produced subjectivity away from assumed subjective positions. Transversal theory, thus, emerges as a means by which to existing structures of power within dominant institutional spaces or perceptions in order to maximize communication between "all the levels and sectors of an institution," moving in a diverse array of directions as boundaries are traversed. Application of Guattari's transversality to the "therapeutic coefficient" prompts an "unfixing rigid roles, thawing frozen hierarchies, and opening hitherto closed blinkers" through which one can shift their subjective positionality and expand their limited perceptions.²⁴ In his exploration of transversality in the therapeutic paradigm, Guattari reconstitutes the production of subjectivity away from models inherited from systems of authority, such as adult's perceptions of adolescence, in favor that which the

²² Kende, Hanna. *Psychodrama with Children: Healing Children through Their Own Creativity*. Routledge, 2017, 4.

²³ Guattari, Félix. *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955-1971; Introduction by Gilles Deleuze; Translated by Ames Hodges*. Semiotexte, 2015, 113.

²⁴ Genosko, Gary. "Afterword: Subjects Matter." *Transversal Subjects*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009, pp. 262–71, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239289_6, 262.

individual creates themselves. It is in the resistance to this transversality in a desire for theatrical perfection, in the fear of engaging with the messiness of transversality, that I believe the most effective therapeutic potential may surface.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation upon which this investigation is initiated is grounded, in part, in traditional conceptions of trauma theory. Perception of traumatic experience as stressors, both acute and chronic, which “increase the psychological distress,” gestures to a traumatic neurosis that persists as time elapses between the initial occurrence and the initial appearance of the perceived, traumatic.²⁵ This “incubation period” presents a “transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease,” as traumatic affect lies in wait until it emerges with a force that impedes entrance into perceptual consciousness.²⁶ By this estimation, epistemological claims that an event considered traumatic by those who have experienced it should be perceived as conscious “knowledge can be translated into a familiar mimetic universe” fail to recognize the relative unknowability of the initial event.²⁷ Thus, the assumption that repressed or sedimented encounters must be brought into consciousness and translated into usable material through appropriation by traditional psychiatric techniques persists amongst trauma theorists, despite its clear limitations.

Attempts to construct meaning out of “a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness,” particularly that which is marred by distressing affect, seek to recontextualize traumatic experience and the impact it has not only on one’s subjectivity but on

²⁵ Norris, Fran H, Matthew J Friedman, and Patricia J Watson. “60,000 Disaster Victims Speak: Part II. Summary and Implications of the Disaster Mental Health Research.” *Psychiatry (Washington, D.C.)* 65.3 (2002): 240–260. Web, 246.

²⁶ Caruth, 18.

²⁷ Rothberg, 3–4.

the body as well.²⁸ Intensified interest in the “mind-body-problem” amongst theorists foregrounds the delineation of unrepresented and unconscious meaning that arises out of traumatic experiences and its ability to be worked through within a psychoanalytic framework.²⁹ While initially inclined to adopt this theoretical framework, the psychoanalytic perspective of the body as strictly a “repository of symbolic meaning,” though it does productively deconstruct the Cartesian body-mind duality, relies heavily on the construction of meaning that may not always be accessible to those impacted by traumatic affect and its controlled reintegration into the narratological estimation of the self.³⁰ Moreover, the therapist’s assimilation of psychic content in psychoanalytic approaches centralizes the role of the therapist in this process of meaning-making, which, in turn, further compounds the repression of the individual’s interior truth. Rather than reifying any sense of control that the individual may feel in therapeutic processes, the traumatic memory becomes closely associated with the analyst’s interpretation, rather than that of the traumatized individual themselves.

Thus, the controlled reintegration that is so essential to psychoanalytic, therapeutic processes is rendered ineffectual by the prolonged generation of momentum in the continuous repression of affect-driven memory, which necessitates more rigorous therapeutic approaches than traditional psychoanalytic techniques. Assessments of the incorporation of alternative therapeutic disciplines and methodologies, particularly those driven by creative pursuits, foster opportunities to chart the “development (formative evaluation), implementation (process evaluation), and impact (impact and outcome evaluation)” that non-traditional processes might

²⁸ Caruth, 9.

²⁹ Leuzinger-Bohleber, Marianne. *Finding the Body in the Mind: Embodied Memories, Trauma, and Depression*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2015, doi:10.4324/9780429474781, xix.

³⁰ Cohen, Josh. *Psychoanalytic Bodies*, Cambridge University Press, New York, New York, 2015, pp. 214–229, 215.

have on young populations as they investigate the past.³¹ It is by embracing the uncanny or monstrous attributes of traumatic memory and the affect it elicits, particularly in a creatively aesthetic space, that experiential knowledge which has been repressed in the unconscious and the disparate responses it elicits may be explored and worked through in a more palpable and effectual manner.

Disparate Responses to Traumatic Affect

Common conceptions amongst scholars suggest that responses to experiences of traumatic affect vary markedly, even when the individuals have experienced similar, if not identical, events. Varied outcomes, expressed both behaviorally and psychologically, are elicited in response to a multitude of factors that contribute to the contextualization of one's understanding of the events and their affective dimensions. Determinant components, including but by no means limited to severity of exposure and the individual's personal characteristics, evoke disparate approaches to the expression of distressing affect as it forces itself upon the conscious mind.³² The experiential and affective dimensions of the initial occurrence and the lens through which it is perceived frame the impact that the event leaves on the individual as the experience becomes encoded and outwardly disseminated through various modes of expression. Given that the effects of these events are "multifaceted and frequent," the embodied and cerebral reflexes that are involuntarily charged take on disparate forms over time as the context in which these responses transpire shifts.

³¹ Gilbert, Keon L., et al. "Say Something, Do Something: Evaluating a Forum Theater Production to Activate Youth Violence Prevention Strategies in Schools." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2023, pp. 39-, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21010039>, 42.

³² Norris et al., 224.

Thus, the disparate responses to the same traumatic event may occur within the individual themselves as the sheer multidimensional complexity of the initial encounter progressively emerges into one's conscious understanding of the event. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman posits that the "ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness," though they often refuse to be buried.³³ Much like the common assumption that the traumatized self "freezes the mental sense of time and produces an internal temporal standstill" which manifests solely in deviant behavior, Herman's supposition of a universal, ordinary response restricts the vital recognition not just of the complex means by which individuals are inscribed by a traumatic past but of the potential for the transformation of the individual's responsive perspective or behavior. This is exceedingly evident in younger populations who are more susceptible to the effects of distressing affect than their adult counterparts, yet the former are less equipped to cope than the latter and are, consequently, characterized habitually by their supposedly deviant behavior. Frequently attributed to "instinctual arousal [and the] inability to comprehend and make sense of the world," the association between experiences perceived by adolescents as traumatic and the problematic behavior they may exhibit is not often made by the adults in their lives, despite the conventional presumption that the body is inseparable from the psyche.³⁴

Youth populations exhibit unique responses to upsetting encounters, such as delinquency and hyperactivity, while also remaining vulnerable to the same somatic complaints, psychological struggles, and ongoing stress to which adults are subjected. As remembrances of past events are brought to bear on the present, the eruption of affect once repressed in the past

³³ Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Fourth trade paperback edition. New York: Basic Books, 2022. Print, 1.

³⁴ Norris et al., 243.

emerges intrusively through both “sensory or declarative aspects of the event.”³⁵ As such, studies of adolescent behavior conclude that, though some objective school records suggest a decrease in disruptive behaviors, there remain increasing levels of disaster-related elevations in disruptive action amongst younger populations.³⁶ Nonetheless, whether there is an increase or decrease in divergent behavior, the reductive labeling of adolescent individuals with “conditions” in lieu of recognizing the underlying affective dimensions endeavors to define future interactions and behaviors, which, in turn, shape perceptual estimations of reality and identity in harmful and disadvantageous ways. Deconstruction of such problematic codifications necessitates further exploration of therapeutic processes that seek positive influences on adolescent emotion, cognition, and behavior.

Traumatic Deconstructionism

If the affect elicited in direct experience is truly unmediated in nature, as many suggest that it is, then it follows that the interpretive frames through which one comes to manufacture meaning, to maintain a sense of continuity, are rendered relatively ineffectual in an experience of distressing affect. These interpretive frames serve as spaces wherein links of associations work towards the contrivance of meaning. In an attempt to establish order within subjective territories, — the site of a normalized and socially-determined ‘individual’ who is subjectified by the dominant agencies and discourses of socialization and executive power — the associative links within the interpretive frames shape perspective as one reflects on the embodied experience. The body attempts to connect and consolidate traumatic memories around discourses manufactured

³⁵ Malchiodi, Cathy A. *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*; Foreword by Bruce D. Perry. Guilford Press, 2008, 5.

³⁶ Shaw, Applegate, and Schorr, 1996; Shaw et al., 1995; referenced in Norris et al., 217.

by dominant socio-political structures. Thus, the presence of a central function, a codifying framework, which maintains a reductive perceptual subjectivity, renders such discourse subject to what Jacques Derrida terms the “universal problematic,” which persists in its immutability.

By referring to the presence of a center as a “universal problematic,” Derrida suggests that accepted discourses are subjected to the “violence” that constitutes the act of centering, as it limits the potential for the introduction of new modes of discourse or subjective territories. When faced with the removal of a previously held subject position predicated on the universal problematic, the individual entrenched in an experience of excessive affect scrambles to redefine themselves by taking on an alternative, deconstructed position through play. Resistance to the notion that “transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden,” the removal of a structural center opens up the continuous substitution of multiplicitous centers around which a singular subjectivity is unable to consolidate itself.³⁷ This act of decentering initiates transversal movement across subjective boundaries which, in turn, exposes the universal problematic while simultaneously facilitating the very transformation that the previously held center, which arrests movement of supplementarity inherent in play, has prohibited.

It is in the return to the state of vulnerability, a transversal state of play in itself, that one might work through the affective excess implicit in a traumatic past. It is in the re-immersion into a state of unmediated, arguably monstrous experience, in which one’s subjectivity splinters and re-fuses in a multiplicity of unpredictable dimensions, that productive transversality is mobilized. Within this open space of tumultuous, frenzied processes, the performative expression of inarticulatory affective overwhelm bolsters a drive towards imaginative creation of

³⁷ Derrida, 84.

alternative selves and, more broadly, alternative perceptual reality. The inherent creativity of adolescence embodies a far more complex and productive potentiality for a process of willful becomings that resists the comings-to-be — inadvertent, as “our curiosity, investment, and momentum make us vulnerable to the powers of what we encounter, its objective agency” — that often define an individual’s identity.³⁸ This is, in part, a result of play’s ability to maintain certain regulations that inhibit the monstrous capacities of our limitless potential to become something else entirely. In effect, transversality liberates the subject inasmuch as it undermines or exceeds the individual’s subjective territory and, consequently, the official frameworks of perceptual reality that the maintenance of that subjective territory was intended to reinforce.³⁹

The expressive nature of the theatrical open or empty space legitimizes its designation as a creative realm in which one might produce his or her own circumstances. It is in this space that continuity and discontinuity, pain and pleasure, life drive and death drive become inextricably de-dichotomized, linking points of exploration with one another in an almost supplementary manner. The shock of destabilization, though it threatens the coherence of one’s subjectivity, both assuages and encourages a productive uncomfortability, a return to the state of vulnerability in which affective excess and the trauma it arouses are re-encountered and, potentially, worked through. Such destabilization of comfortable dichotomies enhances a sort of in-between space of opportunity, a space in which a fugitive explorer might interrogate the seemingly natural expressive forces that a child or adolescent exhibits in the process of play.

The hypothetical, supplementarity-driven exploration of transversal affectivity, and the sense of self it engenders, is predicated on the perceptual framework that one has fashioned for

³⁸ Reynolds, Bryan, and Gregory de la Haba. *The Transversality of Gregory de La Haba : The Future of Art and Myth Are upon Us*. PCP Press, 2022, 20.

³⁹ Genosko, 264; in Reynolds, Bryan. *Transversal Subjects*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009, pp. 262–71, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239289_6, 262.

themselves through a performative reality. If trauma warps perception, then it follows that an experience of trauma, when simultaneously perceived physically, conceptually, and emotionally, shifts the subject's relationship with their environment as disparate points that connect at various sites, expanding not only that which is perceivable but, consequently, the subjective territory within and through which one operates and experiences. The introduction of more insertion points of experiential knowledge from alternative subjectivities that emerge as one exists relationally with the theatrical other exposes one's consciousness to an overabundance of affective signifiers unbound by a diminishing interpretive framework. Performative expression filters the noise, or affective overwhelm, and negotiates the connectivity of the fractured pieces that need to be reconnected. By positioning this expressive negotiation across multiple subjective territories, the performative exploration of alternative identities, alternative ways of living, and alternative perceptions of reality initiates becomings-through-performance in which these hypothetical alternatives become present realities.

Affective Overwhelm and Perceptions of Trauma in Adolescence

During the 2025 Comparative Drama Conference in London, where I shared a portion of the third chapter entitled "Braving the Storm: Self-Negotiation through the Collaborative Creation of Therapeutic Performance," a member of the audience raised the question of whether or not this work operates under the assumption that all adolescents have experienced trauma. This inquiry prompted my own exploration of how the term is understood and whether this work falls prey to the common conflation of traumatic encounters with any experience that may seem distressing, as the designation of trauma is often employed to add a deeper dramatic effect to a given situation. Theoretical underpinnings of traumatic occurrences rely heavily on forces that

elicit “a sense of a foreshortened future.”⁴⁰ Thus, the question remains: if an experience, distressing as it is, is not categorically life-threatening, is it still traumatic? In my exploration of the term and its potential alternatives, Caruth’s description of trauma as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed uncontrolled repetitive appearance” emerged as an apt articulation of distressing adolescent experience, though her perpetuation of the catastrophic left me still in search of a term that accurately expressed that which encompasses the diverse experience with which this work engages.⁴¹

Thus, I turned to my own term, affective overwhelm, in an attempt to accurately determine these authentic experiences. Experiences of affective overwhelm are acutely associated with experiences of sensory overload, though the term fails to capture the expansive nature of its impact on an individual’s sense of self and their perceptual reality. The disruption provoked by the complex and continued impact of unexpected and intense stimuli, particularly in adolescents, manifests as uncontrollable and “explosive emotions, noncompliant behavior, psychological numbness, cognitive problems, or other reactions,” depending on disparate factors.⁴² The experience of waking into consciousness through explosive affect, overwhelming as it may be, forces the individual to perpetually relive the affect without any hope of redress. While not all experiences of affective overwhelm are inherently traumatic, they do often provoke feelings of helplessness in the face of instinctual arousal and intolerable danger in the essence of trauma without bearing the label. In these moments, the subjective space upon which

⁴⁰ Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton University Press, 2002, 40.

⁴¹ Caruth, 12.

⁴² Malchiodi, 7-8.

the perceptual experience is built is inundated with an “overabundance of signifiers, in relation to the signified” that shape one’s subjective plane.⁴³

When, in the midst of over-signification, escape or resistance is impossible, one’s capacity for self-defense becomes fragmented and disorganized, especially when these occur during key moments of development; Yet, this overabundance of signifiers also arguably provides materials for the creative supplementary-driven processes that enhance problem solving and facilitate the renegotiation of perceptual realities of the self. Reconstitution of affective overwhelm into “positive youth development and resilience frameworks,” particularly one that accounts for varied experiences and responses, can transform the affective noise that was once overwhelming into that which the individual can create through expression.⁴⁴ In her integrative five-phase model of drama therapy, Emunah draws a connection between emotional expression and the sense of knowing one’s feelings. Such a conclusion proposes the necessity of expression in the therapeutic process, without reliance on Aristotelian catharsis, as it bodies forth interior affect and fosters engagement with rather than overwhelm by the experience and its subjective dimensions.

Devising in Crisis: Therapeutic Dimensions of Creative Construction

Multidimensional, dramatic approaches to therapy have emerged over time in response to the call for developmentally appropriate interventions that address adolescent traumatic memories and the implications of remembrance on the young participant’s present. Integrative approaches to therapeutic processes incorporate various expressive techniques for the purpose of

⁴³ Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences.” *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. University Press of Florida, 1990, 91.

⁴⁴ Gilbert et al, 40.

fostering affective awareness, emotional growth, and a sense of agency amongst adolescent populations who often feel unheard. Much like responses to traumatic encounters are molded by a variety of determinate factors, the specific theatrical techniques implemented in the therapeutic modality should be selected based on a variety of orientations of both the practices themselves and those participating in them.⁴⁵ Though this awareness of the fecundity of differing theatrical techniques when engaging diverse populations of young people is second to the vital estimation that the dramatic practices themselves do not “serve the therapy, the drama process contains the therapy.”⁴⁶ As such, through the exploration of the intersections between therapeutic devised theatre practices and the complex phenomenon of affective overwhelm in adolescents, I have sought to answer the following question: What are the therapeutic implications of collaboratively created theatre when working with adolescents who have experienced moments of affective overwhelm?

Incorporation of creative praxes in therapeutic pursuits is perhaps most effective in adolescents, as a result of the innate imaginative and transversal exploration exhibited in younger populations. Studies propose that all humans “develop basic dramatic skills at the age of 3-5, a time when they naturally begin learning about the world through imitation and dramatic play.”⁴⁷ References to the inherent capacity for play in young individuals gesture at the relative ineffectual quality of traditional therapeutic processes while advocating for an approach that stimulates an imagination that is always already present in the participant. At the National Theatre’s panel entitled “Young People on Young Theatre,” one speaker spoke to the imagination and creativity that children exhibit without prompting from outside forces:

⁴⁵ Barba, Fuchs, & Knill, 1995; Estrella, 2005; referenced in Malchiodi, 12.

⁴⁶ Walsh, Fintan. *Theatre and Therapy*. Revised edition., Methuen Drama, 2024, 39.

⁴⁷ Blatner, 166.

You only have to go into a primary school to see children act. The role play in the nursery even... between the ages of naught and five is when the child develops most of his creative sort of urges, and they express them without any inhibitions, and yet, you move into secondary education and their quashed out of you. You have no opportunity to express anything creative.⁴⁸

This need to express through creative engagement, though not often permitted, punctuates the productive capacity for transversal exploration that is in danger of being lost as the child develops. Yet, providing these young individuals with a space of uninhibited, imaginative creation, particularly for therapeutic purposes, prompts the transformation of overwhelming affect into material for the construction of an environment in which their voice may be heard and agency may be obtained.

Recontextualization of distressing affect in this creative space imbues the adolescent participants with the ability to access reality from an alternative insertion point, one that is no longer characterized by a traumatic framework but by the impulse to preserve the unique experiences of each collaborator. The Youth-Led Arts-Based Participatory Action Research notes the fundamental characteristic that constitutes art as a “rigorous medium for analyzing, producing, and sharing knowledge.”⁴⁹ Thus, by participating in artistic pursuits, individuals engage in the onto-epistemological negotiation of what is known about the self and its environment in the wake of traumatic fragmentation, wherein individuals are unseated from their previously held subjective position. Saturated with what Maurice Apprey terms “transference wishes,” or the demands to “render palpable [...] turbulence that is striving to enter our

⁴⁸ “Young People on Young Theatre.” 2 July 1991. RNT/PL/3/72, Platforms Audio Recordings, National Theatre Archive, London. 1 cassette.

⁴⁹ Wright, Laura H. V., et al. “Youth-Led Arts-Based Participatory Action Research.” *Handbook of Social Inclusion*, Springer International Publishing, 2022, pp. 1469–86, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-89594-5_80, 2.

contemporary scene,” the imaginative, theatrical space entertains the possibility of “a reconfiguration that fosters healing under new and favorable conditions.”⁵⁰ Adolescents are able to form these new, favorable conditions for themselves when these creative therapeutic practices are situated in the context of devised theatre.

Occupation of the devising space gives rise to the transformation of a traumatic event into an “evential” that overturns present possibilities in the world in favor of possible reconfigurations of reality that have not yet entered into collective consciousness.⁵¹ Negotiation of an alternative past or present through an experimental, embodied process that harnesses the adolescent’s potential for play facilitates the rehearsal of alternative responses and the reworking of the habitual patterns of thought and behavior when one comes face to face with overwhelming affect. Practices of drama therapy, which rely heavily on the participant’s imagination, seek to both “hold a mirror to real life” and “provide a dramatic experience that real life can then mirror.”⁵² The proposed reciprocal relationship between real life and drama therapy praxis is indicative of an experimental conversation between that which has been experienced in reality and that which might be experienced in imaginative play.

While similar in their estimation of the therapeutic dimensions of performance, I am disinclined to suggest that this proposed work falls under the umbrella of drama therapy or psychodrama explicitly. Rather, therapeutic projects centered on collaboratively created theatre incorporate spontaneous thoughts, actions, and experiences that emerge in moments of affective overwhelm into an expressive performance over which co-creators have a sense of agency. As the devising process unfolds, the process of continuous modification is shaped as authentic,

⁵⁰ Apprey, Maurice. *Trans-Generational Trauma and the Other: Dialogues Across History and Difference*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 32–53, doi:10.4324/9781315466293-10., 16, 36.

⁵¹ Ibid, 31.

⁵² Emunah, 304.

albeit potentially radical, circumstances and contexts are unearthed in the disintegration of the perceptual reality structured around a restrictive, codifying framework. In this sense, collaboratively created performance, whether intentionally therapeutic or not, is more akin to Deleuze and Guattari's estimation of creations as "mutant abstract lines that detached themselves from the task of representing a world," moving beyond simply serving as a reciprocal mirror for established reality.⁵³ Although some drama therapy scholars suggest that the "act of creation is in direct opposition to the destruction that often results from trauma," it is precisely in placing this destructive affect, or the monstrous capacity, in direct conversation with young people's innate capacity for play that the therapeutic dimensions of devised theatre work are most palpable. The "freedom of possibilities" that might be made in the spontaneous devising process, as one uncovers affective dimensions that were once unconsciously felt, constitute material for the productive, flexible negotiation of that which is so fundamental to the adolescent experience, namely subjectivity, reality, and identity. Through devising therapeutic theatre, the process of collaborative creation and the productions that emerge out of the work allow the participants to actively rehearse possible responses and productive behaviors that affirm their perception rather than threaten it.

Research Framework

The intention here is to elucidate the therapeutic benefits of capitalizing on a child's imaginative exploration of diverse subjective territories through the collaboratively devised theatre. Thus, the project builds upon the notion that through re-enactments of past experiences using creative methods, adolescents may transform material perceived as traumatic into the

⁵³ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Athlone Press, 1988, 296.

building blocks of an alternative subjectivity. Through my engagement with diverse works and processes, this project recognizes the importance of providing young adolescents with the opportunity to claim agency over their own experiences and perceptual reality, as well as negotiate behaviors and identities beyond what is imposed upon them. However, unlike those studies that suggest mastery and meaning as key factors in the therapeutic process, this project endeavors to advocate for allowing adolescents to rest in the messy yet potentially productive tension between the negative implications of overwhelm and that which collaborators themselves can generate. Through an investigation of collaboratively devised theatre, whether intentionally therapeutic or not, the creation of a space unencumbered by the boundaries of reality bears the potential to transform the overwhelming affective dimensions, or their propensity for harmful behavior, into a creative drive through which the supplementary negotiation of theatrical devising processes can refashion the subjectivity that serves as the foundational principles for adolescent experience.

Methodological Praxis

In a 2013 article outlining her work with teenage girls, activist-scholar-artist-educator Dana Edell presents a unique methodology that “combined interviews, observations, self-reflection, and text analysis.”⁵⁴ Influenced by Edell’s approach, the methodology incorporated in this project orients the research toward a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between theatrical practices and therapeutic pursuits. After conducting interviews with creative directors and project facilitators, I traveled to London in order to observe the work of the National Theatre’s Speak Up, a program instituted in 2021 to develop young people’s self-expression,

⁵⁴ Edell, Dana. ““Say It How It Is”: Urban Teenage Girls Challenge and Perpetuate Stereotypes Through Writing and Performing Theatre.” *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, pp. 51–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2012.722903>, 53.

well-being and personal skills in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with an open-ended offer to make creative projects in their local area. that engaged young students at schools in the city's various boroughs. Observation of the diverse groups and the theatrical productions they devised over the school year provided firsthand accounts of the impact that the creation process and the performances created out of them had on the young participant's perception of themselves and the world around them. Contextualized by the interviews and observations conducted, I engaged analytically with the documented process notes and scripts in order to investigate the fecundity of disparate approaches to therapeutic, theatrical practices, whether or not therapy is the initial intent.

Therapeutic Theatrical Toolbox

As my research progressed, I sought to generate a pedagogical, theoretical, and practical toolbox for therapeutic devised theatre work with adolescents in response to the lack of digital or physical commons to guide approaches. Integration of the work of the Speak Up program and the six foundational strands of Company3's *Brainstorm* with the theoretical principles of Jones' core processes and Emunah's five-phase model, sets the foundation for a versatile and adaptable toolbox for future therapeutic devised theatre practice. Rather than constituting a fixed curriculum, the toolbox that this project begins to establish offers a flexible set of entry points and aesthetic devices that can be tailored to the needs, capacities, and contexts of diverse groups of adolescents. Each tool, on some level, activates distinct therapeutic mechanisms, such as symbolic projection, role-based distancing, collective witnessing, and transformation. Grounded in these individual elements, the overall toolbox mirrors a developmentally attuned arc from imaginative play to reflective negotiation. This toolbox can be drawn upon to design new

processes that respond dynamically to affective overwhelm, particularly among adolescents, allowing facilitators to modulate emotional intensity, thematic focus, and group cohesion with sensitivity and creativity. By embracing spontaneity in a loose framework, this approach supports the co-creation of safe yet provocative spaces where participants can explore identity, emotion, and interpersonal dynamics through embodied, collaborative storytelling.

Significance

By focusing on adolescents, rather than children or adults, this research harnesses the natural creative instincts of childhood with the rapid growth, increased sense of independence, and exploration of identity that are characteristic of adolescent states of development. Alternative therapeutic processes for adolescents are crucial for navigating the unique challenges of this developmental stage, fostering positive mental health outcomes, and promoting healthy coping mechanisms that enable young people to envision a productive future. Situation of these therapeutic processes in the theatrical real seeks to create a safe space for young people who have faced particularly distressing encounters to address emotional and behavioral issues and build resilience for the future.

While drama therapy and psychodrama techniques have become increasingly prominent in scholarship, the resistance to resting in the mess in favor of claiming control or mastery over traumatic affect through the creation of meaning arguably devalues the therapeutic potential of devising performances, an inherently transversal process in itself, by emphasizing the product that is created rather than the process of creation itself. Moreover, few scholars have recognized the importance of investigating the therapeutic dimensions of theatre devised by adolescents which are not necessarily intended to serve as therapy yet nonetheless do. Despite the lack of

scholarship, the process of collaborative creation necessitates the same vulnerability evoked in other forms of therapy, as the act of creation necessitates some level of risk in its experimentation. By gesturing at the therapeutic potential in the creative process, this project emphasizes the capacity for the “social expression of non-hierarchical possibilities” to “give voice to the voiceless” through the integration of alternative points of view in the rehearsal process without remaining confined to repressive structures.⁵⁵

Chapter Breakdown

The subsequent chapters build upon historical and theoretical discourses as they investigate the implications of traditional and established therapeutic theatre techniques on the destructive drive that emerges from a traumatic experience in order to build a foundational understanding of how therapy operates within the performative sphere. The individual techniques that operate within theatre-based therapies vary exponentially in form and content, though their desired results remain relatively homogenous. Expanding the comprehension of these theatre-based therapies, this project will explore how participants are able to explore affective overwhelm while acknowledging the foundational subjective dimensions that constitute fractured, traumatic experience and their relationship to the psychological and embodied responses exhibited by adolescents.

Chapter One

⁵⁵ Heddon, Deirdre, and Jane Milling. *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. Revised edition., Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 7.

The first chapter, entitled “Pieces at Play: Ameliorating Affective Overwhelment through Devised Theatre Processes,” explores the potential for collaboratively created, devised theatre to serve as a therapeutic process for adolescents experiencing affective overwhelm—intense emotional states that resist linguistic articulation. Emphasizing process over product, the chapter critiques traditional narrative structures in both theatre and therapy, arguing that embodied, improvisational, and collaborative creation offers more authentic and effective means of working-through overwhelming affect. Central to this argument is the creation of a therapeutic third space — a liminal, imaginative, and safe environment — that enables young participants to relive, reconfigure, and rearticulate traumatic or emotionally intense experiences through play. Drawing on theorists like Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, and Damasio, the chapter frames affect not as a linear, resolvable entity but as a dynamic, fragmentary, and often unconscious force that can be engaged through performance, not merely understood or contained through language.

Case studies from the National Theatre’s Speak Up program and the *Uncensored* series by and Manhattan Class Company’s (MCC) Youth Company, a New-York-based program intended to celebrate and honor the mosaic of identities of young people and their experiences in a collaborative and socially conscious environment, illustrate how adolescents utilize theatre to express marginalized experiences, develop agency, and explore identity, particularly around issues of mental health, racism, and social inequality. The chapter also problematizes scripting as a means of containment while highlighting the importance of episodic, nonlinear, and dialogic structures that mirror the complexities of adolescent emotional life. Ultimately, this chapter argues that theatre-as-process, rather than theatre-as-product, provides fertile ground for the therapeutic working-through of affective overwhelm, not by offering closure or catharsis, but by enabling continuous negotiation, expression, and re-imagination of self and experience.

Chapter Two

The second chapter, entitled “Reckless Reframing: Reconstructions of Reality through Transversal Temporalities and Trauma-Informed Theatre,” examines how trauma distorts individual perceptions of reality and explores the role of collaboratively created theatrical processes as a medium for reconfiguring those perceptions. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Rothberg, Guattari, Derrida, Jung, and others, the chapter introduces the concept of traumatic realism as a fractured lens through which individuals, especially younger populations, experience and represent overwhelming emotional events. The chapter emphasizes how transversal temporalities—nonlinear, layered experiences of time—open up therapeutic possibilities when enacted in dramatic reality, a space where personal, social, and fictional realities intersect. Theatre becomes a site for both witnessing and reimagining moments of affective overwhelm, allowing young participants to rehearse alternative responses, explore generational memory, and inhabit multiple subjectivities.

Case studies, including further examinations of Speak Up and ViBe, a New-York-based company founded in 2002 by Dana Edell that seeks to empower teenage girls through the performing arts, in conversation with plays from the National Theatre’s Connections Festival, an annual youth theatre festival intended to celebrate the creativity and talent of young people across the UK, demonstrate how collaborative, improvisational performance can empower youth to deconstruct dominant narratives, interrogate social reality, and build new frameworks of understanding through embodiment and co-creation. The chapter argues that by engaging in Boalean “rehearsals for revolution,” adolescents are not just processing affective overwhelm—they are actively reshaping their relationship to history, identity, and

community. Ultimately, the chapter positions theatre as a transformative, affective practice that bridges private and public spheres, enabling participants to reintegrate their fractured realities through creative, therapeutic, and socially engaged play.

Chapter Three

The third chapter, entitled “Braving the Storm: Self-Negotiation through the Collaborative Creation of Therapeutic Performance,” investigates the intersection of affective overwhelm, identity, and therapeutic performance, particularly in the context of adolescents navigating adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Drawing on theories from Lacan, Jung, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and trauma theorists such as Janoff-Bulman and Freyd, the chapter argues that experiences of overwhelming affect fractures the adolescent’s ability to form a cohesive narrative of self. Through case studies and fieldwork with organizations such as the National Theatre’s Speak Up program and *Brainstorm* by Islington-based Company3, a theatre company that seeks to give teenagers the power to tell their own stories and create their own change, the chapter illustrates how collaborative theatrical processes, such as mask-making, role-play, and devised performance, enable young people to engage in embodied self-exploration and re-narrativization. The use of masks is shown to externalize internal affect, providing a safe space for adolescents to confront and express previously repressed emotions.

The chapter theorizes the mask not just as a prop, but as a liminal tool that mediates between face and role, inner self, and social expectation. It demonstrates how role theory and psycho-dramatic techniques allow adolescents to inhabit multiple facets of identity, rehearse responses to trauma, and reimagine interpersonal dynamics, especially within the family. It also addresses the transformative potential of creating communal performance spaces where

alternative identities and affective becomings can be explored without judgment. The chapter contends that theatrical processes foster agency, voice, and resilience in young people by enabling them to author alternative interpretations of their experiences. It positions performance as a vital site for the re-integration of fragmented selves and the cultivation of a fluid, multifaceted understanding of identity in the aftermath of complex experiences charged with intense, distressing affect.

Conclusion

The concluding chapter culminates in a call for a paradigm shift in how program facilitators, therapists, and practitioners approach affective work with adolescents. Rather than framing healing as the attainment of closure or coherence, this project advocates for embracing ongoing, embodied processes that foreground multiplicity, contradiction, and creative agency. Devised theatre processes provide fertile ground for this kind of work, particularly when guided by trauma-informed, nonhierarchical facilitation. Therapeutic devising is not a panacea, nor should it be. Its strength lies in its refusal of completion, its resistance to mastery, and its embrace of contradiction. What this research affirms is that adolescents—often underestimated or unheard—hold within them a capacity for profound creative insight. When given the space to shape the process, inhabit their stories, and perform their truths, they not only rehearse change but generate it.

In this way, devised theatre is not just a form of healing—it is a form of becomings that is neither linear nor final. They are ongoing, recursive, and transformative —offering each participant the opportunity to reclaim authorship over their affective histories and write new possibilities into their futures. Exploration of the ongoing, transformative potential of these

theatre companies and their work, in direct conversation with the foundational principles of trauma and performance theories highlights the productive potential of collaboratively created theatre processes for adolescent populations. Thus, in light of the research outlined here, those practices that have emerged as the most fertile serve as guiding principles for the development of a therapeutic theatrical toolbox and for facilitators of collaborative theatre therapy, including myself, as they learn to accept the affective and metaphorical “mess” of adolescent experience.

Pieces at Play:

Ameliorating Affective Overwhelm through Devised Theatre Processes

The personal and immediate characteristics of devised theatre are bolstered when the material incorporated into the work is based on lived experiences, affect, ideas, and responses encountered in the real world. Concerned with the “collective creation of art (not the single version of the playwright),” the distinctive separation in theatrical devising between the creative process of working with such fruitful material and the theatrical production, i.e. the product, that is presented to a wider audience calls into question not only where authority lies in the creation of the piece, but which stage should serve as the focal point for the work.⁵⁶ In reflecting on his devising work, Chris Kamenstein struggles to determine his position on the matter as he negotiates the relationship between the process in which he engaged and the product created from it:

Actually, I think process is better in a vacuum and product is better with an audience, or vice versa, because product is a natural distillation of process, but wait, I can't decide if that's true, it's probably not, I take it back, product is separate from process and is overrated, except that I love watching good product and it's the only thing that matters, really. I take back my take-back and now am making a new statement: process versus product—what a clusterfuck.⁵⁷

Kamenstein's inability to reach a conclusion on the matter is indicative of the tension that emerges as one seeks to maintain the openness of the process and the authority of the

⁵⁶ Oddey, Alison. *Devising Theatre : A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*. Routledge, 1994., 4.

⁵⁷ Kamenstein, Chris. “Process and Product and Product and Process.” *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, 14 Dec. 2014, howlround.com/process-and-product-and-product-and-process.

collaborators while also staging a production suitable for the consumption of an outside audience.

This debate between process and product is even more potent when devised theatre, or some variation of it, is integrated into therapeutic praxes for young participants. Common assertions amongst drama therapists maintain that to “take hold of one’s pain and then to shape and transform it into a communicative art form is healing.”⁵⁸ Though this healing is, first and foremost, associated with the creation of meaning dictated by a centralized theme, the notion of reshaping painful material into that which can be articulated serves as a foundational principle for the use of devised theatre for therapeutic means. If one is able to move past any theme chosen by a director or facilitator and its dictation of the “a way of working and even its own rhythm of development,” they create space for participants to express and grapple with their individual experiences of affective overwhelm.⁵⁹ Arundhati Roy posits that art can “make the impalpable palpable, make the intangible tangible, and the invisible visible” through embodied play.⁶⁰ In bodying forth the intangible affect that continues to impact the body and mind, theatrical practice resituates the creator within a liberated laboratory space in which they can “rehearse, review, preview, and experiment with real life” while evoking the “healthful if not essential value of play.”⁶¹

Much like the liminal space between the Askleion Clinic and Theatre of Epidaurus acts as a bridge between performance and healing, the play enacted in the theatrical laboratory operates as a part of the therapeutic process with the potential for healing. Establishment of a

⁵⁸ Emunah, 290-1.

⁵⁹ Felseghi, Alexandra. “Devised Theatre – a Short Introduction.” *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Dramatica*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2017, pp. 61–68, <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbdrama.2017.1.05>, 61.

⁶⁰ Roy, Arundhati. *Power Politics*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2001. Print, 32-33

⁶¹ Emunah, 3.

spatial relationship between a place of creative expression and a place of therapeutic relief reifies the potential for collaboratively created theatre to “give [participants] back a voice and space to process.”⁶² Motivation to provide students with an opportunity to express and work through distressing affect lies at the heart of the UK-based National Theatre’s Speak Up program and MCC’s Youth Company and their *Uncensored* series, both of which prioritize the experiential knowledge of a younger generation. Through a process of exploration, discovery, development, creation, and sharing, Speak Up provides students with the space to confront issues around which their opinion is often not acknowledged, including mental health, strict policies in schools, aspects of identity, and community-based challenges. By allowing for this negotiation, the program’s focus lies not in “getting to the shiny performance” but in “seeing the small wins” that occur as the creation process unfolds.⁶³ Similarly, MCC’s *Uncensored* series aims to develop a “unique individual voice and what [young peopl] have to say about the world” by providing a space unencumbered by censorship. Through the transformation of individual perception, the process of collaborative creation and the resultant products allows the participants to actively rehearse possible responses and productive behaviors that affirm their perception rather than threaten it.

Theatrical, Therapeutic Third Spaces

The constitution of a therapeutic theatrical space, particularly for young collaborators, necessitates movement away from the strictures of the real in favor of liminality between that which is deemed reality and that which is deemed imaginary. This liminal space seeks to deconstruct binaries and boundaries that negatively influence an individual’s perceptual

⁶² Hart interview, 2024.

⁶³ Ibid.

experience and, consequently, facilitate the exploration of disparate interpretations of those encounters. Although the question of whether this space is attainable in its truest sense remains, attempts to institute such a theatrical laboratory have sought to create an atmosphere of openness and the positive navigation of affect. Driven by the intention to harness theatre as a catalyst for change on both individual and social levels, the creation of this therapeutic theatrical space authorizes, if not welcomes, mistakes and experimentation as a means of growth and knowledge.

In childhood and on through adolescence, there is an intuitive draw toward play as a catalyst for the enactment of what they might be “reliving and what they may find unspeakable.”⁶⁴ Thus, the constitution of a space within which one might participate in this reliving must be unbound by structures that may restrict exploratory play. In his estimation of the drama therapy space, Phil Jones posits that the environment must be “set apart from, but connected to, the everyday world...which has specific rules and ways of being.”⁶⁵ By decentering what it is to “be” in the present moment, the theatrical space removes itself from temporal codifications in favor of more imaginative temporalities that impact the perception of one’s past and their vision of the future. Once the space is temporally deterritorialized, the collaborator working within the space may assert authority over “the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time,” termed *différer* by Ethan Kleinberg.⁶⁶ Thus, the consistent process of becomings in relation to space and time opens up the potential to relive through play by inviting the past into the present and in direct conversation with the future. Temporal deterritorialization liberates creative space and those who operate within it from determinate structures that may limit the capacity for play.

⁶⁴ Malchiodi, xiv.

⁶⁵ Jones, 93.

⁶⁶ Kleinberg, Ethan. *Haunting History: for a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford University Press, 2017, 144.

Facilitation of interactions between temporal, spatial, and subjective landscapes reshapes the given theatrical sphere into a “dispositional space that spontaneously organizes images as a function of ongoing perception and past memories” and allows those perceptions and memories to be expressed in disparate ways.⁶⁷ Likewise, akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s “planes of consistency,” consideration of creative space as a map of disparate planes that are “detachable, reversible, [and] susceptible to constant modification” fragments the supposedly objective ideals that serve as the initial plane of reference in which one operates. The link between the efficacy of drama-based therapies and the core process of play is well established by scholars in the field as displayed through the common assertion that participants can “explore all the possibilities of what can happen and a range of different endings” while “safely contained within the play space.”⁶⁸ As a nexus of perceptual exploration, governed by its liminality, the play space occupies not a singular plane of reference but several overlapping planes determined, for the most part, by the subjectivity of the creative collaborators.

The agency afforded these participants, particularly those in adolescence, is possible only if the creative space is also a safe space where collaborators are able to verbalize and re-enact their experiences without fear of real-world consequences. Agency over the transformational world generated by the imaginative devising process is only possible through collaboration as participants are able to share the responsibility of creative negotiation and grow in their ability to trust others in sharing that agency. Thus, a “safe space” requires, at its very foundation, relationships of trust between collaborators and a sense of autonomy in both the process of creation and in the end product of the devising work. By imbuing adolescents with the ability to

⁶⁷ Damasio, Antonio. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. Westminister: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010. Print.

⁶⁸ Jones, 93.

say “This is our space, how are we going to operate? What is the content we want to put in?,” the devising process affords young individuals a safe space to not only voice their concerns but for those concerns to be heard and acknowledged.⁶⁹ Adolescent, agential creation empowers participants to express interior affective dimensions in a way that incorporates imaginative exploration of one’s experiential knowledge into the theatrical devising process, rendering the work therapeutic in itself.

Articulation of Affective Overwhelment

Upon entering into this sphere of creation and liminality, young participants are primed with the capacity to excavate memories of affective overwhelm that have been preserved in a repressed manner, distinct from explicitly, conscious memories. Scholars suggest that “intense excitation splits the memory into various isolated, somato-sensory elements, into images, affective states and somatic sensations,” which render such memories inarticulatory.⁷⁰

Affective overwhelm, however, becomes traumatic when psychic afflictions fail to be represented, thereby subjecting the individual to a continuous, inescapable state. In

Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955-1971, Guattari posits the necessity of representation in the processual coming to terms with negative, if not traumatic, experiences:

In fact, if we-implicitly or not-reify the objects of study, if we do not give it the means to express itself, even and especially when it does not have adequate means of communication (the means could be dreams, fantasies, myths, pictorial or praxical

⁶⁹ Halpern, Emma. “Teens Devise Plays on Issues That Matter to Them.” *American Theatre*, Theatre Communication Group, 28 Feb. 2017.

⁷⁰ Bohleber, Werner. *Memory, Trauma and Collective memory - The fight for memory in psychoanalysis*. *Psyche*.61. 293-321, 340.

expressions, etc.), then we are taken in by a mirage effect, by relationships of projection on the object considered.⁷¹

Guattari's estimation is an apt articulation of the means by which society often approaches adolescents who have experienced moments of negative overwhelm. When young individuals are not given the space to articulate this overwhelm, the referential framework of adult perceptions of adolescent deviance continues to define the latter's experience.

There is, nonetheless, an almost inherent capacity in young individuals to represent these memories and their affective dimensions metaphorically through theatrical play. By harnessing the creative capacity of young individuals, therapeutic theatrical work transforms that which is meant to serve as a defense mechanism into a productive agent of exploration by liberating defensive actions from structural codification. Therapeutic work with young people often involves the interplay between this imaginative potential and the physical expression of theatre that serves to represent and renegotiate the affect that has been felt if not entirely comprehended. The "sensory nature of creative activities" facilitates the expression of the unspeakable by circumventing linguistic frameworks in favor of embodied articulation.⁷² Previous studies have identified this embodied externalization of negatively overwhelming experiences through liberating play. Expression of an inarticulatory past within a liminal space that young people occupy almost implicitly enables participants to communicate their interior, experiential reality in a way that resists the Guattarian reification of the repressed individual who has been objectified by a label of deviance.

In her work with children, Cathy Malchiodi observed that participants who had "avoided the topic up until now, interrupted each other to tell what they knew and what they thought" as

⁷¹ Guattari, 62.

⁷² Malchiodi, xiv.

they “needed a way to share the awful facts” of what they had been subjected to.⁷³ I observed a similar desire to share at the Leicester-based Speak Up celebration as students participated in a stage combat workshop followed by one centered on spoken word. In each workshop, students from lower socio-economic areas in Leicester engaged in the process of creation driven by issues that most impact their outside world, like accessibility, racism, prejudice towards the young, etc. Out of this theatrical engagement, participants’ temporal, spatial, and bodily states were transformed by movement across expressive boundaries as individuals moved between verbal and embodied actions that “carry the energy of the initial expressive gestures.”⁷⁴ As they moved from workshop to workshop, engaging in diverse modes of expression, the students were able to experiment with alternative means of conveying and reflecting on the overwhelming affect that they felt. One young participant asserted her desire to discuss the boundaries that are often disrespected by adults and the need to hold space for adolescents to express and cope in their own way. After reflecting on her own negative experience, her declaration that others should ask people “what they want and how they want it” spoke to her need to be acknowledged as she recounts her own past.⁷⁵ Expressive reflection, in a broader sense, modifies the chemistry of the body as it shifts the subjective positionality of the individual.

Through the situation of this expressive reflection in the circular-shaped Curve Theatre, wherein rooms are close together, the metaphysical remnants of the individual workshops permeate the physical boundaries of the space. The amalgamation of noise, vocal expressions of words, shouts, beatboxing, etc., mirrors affective overwhelm in a way that allows participants to “seiz[e] control of the quotidian” and demonstrate their ideals through diverse modes of

⁷³ Malchiodi, 97.

⁷⁴ McNiff, Shaun. *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*. Shambhala, 1992, 48.

⁷⁵ Student participant, Leicester Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

expression.⁷⁶ Articulation of affective overwhelm through a bricolage of expressive methodology stimulates traumatic memory, storied and sensory, as creation cumulatively integrates kinesthetic, olfactory, tactile, auditory, or visual elements. The concretization of dramatic projection within the therapeutic theatrical sphere approaches “metaphor through actions” in a way that prompts the emergence of authentic insight into the young participant’s perspectives as they are in the process of creative becomings.⁷⁷ Theatrical embodiment of these emergent perspectives promotes dramatic dialogue between interior, subjective material and the means by which participants express that material in the real world. Dialogic approaches to theatrical creation adhere to the assumption that “saying something about a traumatic memory does something to it.”⁷⁸ While, on some level, the emphasis placed on “saying something” elevates the structure of language as the codifying framework for otherwise inarticulatory material, the situation of that metaphorical speech in the realm of action blurs the boundaries established between body and mind, speech and action, story and performance.

Forging Connection: Linguistic Articulation through Script

The urge to “re-story one’s life” in order to articulate the inarticulatory often emphasizes the creation of a scripted text, structured like a language, as the key therapeutic factor.⁷⁹ To overcome the repression of negative affective dimensions, the act of “filling in the gaps in memory” is often considered the “goal of the analytic treatment,” as remembrance of affective impulses elicited by past experiences generates a field of navigation that was once inaccessible.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Hughes, Jenny, and Simon Parry. “Introduction: Gesture, Theatricality, and Protest - Composure at the Precipice.” *Contemporary theatre review* 25.3 (2015): 300–312. Web., 302.

⁷⁷ Blatner, 167.

⁷⁸ Brison, 48.

⁷⁹ Malchiodi, 167.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Bohleber, 331.

Emphasis on maintaining a narratological structure as one reconstructs and articulates a forgotten past is often perceived as a “speech act that diffuses traumatic memory” by establishing a temporal order.⁸¹ It is this perception of articulation as an act of both body and mind that serves as a foundational principle upon which the therapeutic script is devised and understood.

Michael Rothberg asserts that if language and enactment are “essentially foreign to each other, they nevertheless encounter each other everywhere.”⁸² Devised script work serves as a landscape upon which these encounters occur as narrativized, recurrent memories and the articulatory reenactment of those memories come together to create an embodied, theatrical story. Such articulation of individual memory, when shared in collaboration, constitutes a prelude to scripted, dramatic action through the facilitation of affective expressivity which enables all participants to understand the diverse complexities surrounding moments of overwhelm. Psychologists have incorporated storytelling into traditional therapies, acknowledging its reparative potential in re-establishing a sense of linear, normative understandings of one’s life. Yet, where the collaboration of devised theatrical work diverges from these traditional forms of therapy is its recognition of the cyclical nature of stories. The means by which different stories unfold for diverse participants necessitates a framework that does not adhere to restrictive linearity but mirrors the complex inner conflict in previous dangerous or frightening occurrences. The stories created in the script-devising process become conceptual, metaphorical representations of the interior self as collaborators engage both their imagination and their cognitive understanding of the past to create an authentic articulation of a shared, or similar, past. As participants create scenes out of their individual experiences, situations encountered into the real are further integrated in the realm of the theatrical wherein

⁸¹ Brison, 40.

⁸² Rothberg, 62.

there is no fixed perception or solution to the problematic encounter. Rather, there is autonomy granted to participants over potentially productive conclusions that may be reached outside of a finite ending.

In their work with the Vancouver Youth Vision Coalition (VYVC), Amanda Wagner and Davina Boone sought to bring together a collection of adolescent experiences that were articulated through “youth journal entries from rehearsals in a community center, home journal responses for the play, and oral stories of life in the safe houses and unsafe experiences of living on the streets” in a fictional, scripted text.⁸³ This amalgamation of stories within a strictly fictional landscape prompted the analysis of characters, based on real-life participants, as they rehearsed alternative subjective positionalities and responses to situations that may seem overwhelming when encountered in the real world. Thus, entrance into the collaborative, creative sphere of devised script work, as Wagner and Boone argue, provides young participants with “opportunities to name, explore, and analyze their experiences, and respect them as authors and experts of their own lives.”⁸⁴ Nonetheless, these opportunities were marred by the playwrights’ use of “Google searches for news articles featuring topics related to our own-homeless youth, shelters, and such” and their ultimate authority over what “‘fit’ into the overall story they are aiming to tell.”⁸⁵ The curatorial authority given to the pair as commissioned playwrights for the fictional work complicates its designation as a truly collaborative work and, in turn, diminishes the process’ designation as potentially therapeutic.

⁸³ Wagner, Amanda Claudia, and Davina Boone. “Surviving in the Cracks: A Community-Engaged Methodology with an Applied Theatre Collaborative Script-Analysis.” *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 36, no. 1–2, 2022, pp. 68–118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2022.2147620>, 70.

⁸⁴ Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell 2016, 5; quoted in Wagner and Boone, 114.

⁸⁵ Wagner and Boone, 81.

This is not to say that the incorporation of a commissioned playwright completely disregards the therapeutic potentiality of devised-script work; Rather, it highlights the importance of commissioning a playwright that effectively responds to the “precise needs of the community” as they rework and rewrite the text throughout the development process.⁸⁶ This was the case for the plays performed at National Theatre’s Connections festival, a UK-based youth theatre festival that seeks to “empowe[r] the next generation of theatre-makers” from the ages of thirteen and nineteen.⁸⁷ Connections plays are generated in collaboration through workshops with young individuals and centered around issues that affect them in their daily lives. Collaborative elements within the creation of the plays invited young participants into the devising process while restricting the stories that were shared to a central theme of an already established concept. Presentation of a skeletal outline via a central theme limits the productive capacity for exploratory play as it dictates elements of the plot, characters, settings, etc., in order to present a cohesive script. As the devised product moves closer to a traditional play script, ready to be performed at the Connections festival, the collaborative nature of the process diminishes, leaving young participants with the desire to have “been consulted more in the decision-making process for what was to be included” in the final product.⁸⁸

By this estimation, linguistic representations of affective overwhelm strictly through a script, on some level, fail to effectively represent an adolescent’s sense of being-in-the-world despite collaborative beginnings. That which develops predominantly through narratological structure fails to encompass the totality of the implications of affective overwhelm or, more

⁸⁶ Oddey, 12.

⁸⁷ *Connections*, 2025.

⁸⁸ Hallewas, Anita. “Researching and Devising Youth Theatre: Loss of Voice and Agency through Parachute Theatre.” *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 153–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2019.1688745>, 159.

severely, traumatic experiences due to the inability “for the concrete materiality of the body to be fully present in or on the written page.”⁸⁹ Situation of the script, a restoried life, as a determinate factor for the final performance may aid in the facilitation of the therapeutic process; However, it must be understood as a part of the process rather than the desired result or sole means of recovery for moments of affective overwhelm. Thus, when verbal or written techniques fail in the amelioration of such experiences, the incorporation of embodied movement through play-based enactment is necessary to equip participants to reenact and navigate the sensory elements of memory that cannot always be articulated through language.

Embodied Exploration in Process

Alternative therapeutic processes that emphasize embodied movement resist the restrictive characteristics of narrative-based therapeutic pursuits. The embodiment of the stories shared in collaborative creation transforms the aforementioned linguistic representation of stories into that which is driven by the impulse of “‘felt sense’ in the body” rather than the words used in an attempt to describe it.⁹⁰ By situating the body as the agent of articulation, these embodied stories give voice to the experiential knowledge held in the body that results in material or affective responses that cannot be explained away. The material presence of storied pasts constitutes the body not as a “kind readable text upon which social reality is ‘inscribed’” but as a record, or repertoire, that aptly represents the “bodily states that arise during the perception of an emotional stimulus,” understood here as a moment of affective overwhelm.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Hillman, 3.

⁹⁰ Rubin, Sheila. “Actingout: an interactive youth drama group.” *Interactive and improvisational drama: varieties of applied theatre and performance*, edited by Adam Blatner and Daniel J. WieneriUniverse Inc., 2007, 256, 254.

⁹¹ Csordas, Thomas. “Introduction.” *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 1-24, 12.

Unlike a script that ends when the last page is read, processes that engage the body through reenactment, as Rebecca Schneider articulates, are “*not complete* – not ‘over’ in time.” This ongoing process may incorporate a devised script, but it is merely one of many steps rather than the final product.⁹² Schneider’s estimation of this process in progress is exemplified in another National Theatre initiative that serves as a counterpart to the Connections festival: the Speak Up program. Instituted in response to the challenges that adolescents faced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Speak Up program intended to engage communities “where there is an inequality of access to opportunities for young people and their voices to be heard” in embodied practices of creation.⁹³ Through the creation of devised performances, young participants spent the school year exploring the implications of issues that affect them in an environment that is traditionally “not built with young people in mind.”⁹⁴ While the celebrations, to use Speak Up’s term, meant to showcase the work that had been created throughout the year, it by no means marked the end of the process for these young individuals as they continued to feel the impact of such work both within and outside of the school setting.

During my time observing multiple celebrations, I witnessed the ongoing process of creation with which participants are continuously engaged. The distinctive forms through which each celebration took place liberated the program from a linear beginning and ending, or process and product, in favor of embodied exhibitions that engendered dialogic engagement across spatial and temporal landscapes. The first and, perhaps, most traditional, celebration in Manchester began with the presentation of performances that had been devised over the course of the year before inviting the audience, mostly other Speak Up participants, to roam through

⁹² Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Routledge, 2011, 90.

⁹³ Speak Up, 2025.

⁹⁴ Speak Up Council Member, Manchester Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

exhibits erected throughout the Lowry Theatre. Though not all exhibitions took the form of theatrical performances, the visual representations of key stimuli and the affective responses they elicited emphasized the authentic experiences of adolescents that often go unheard or unacknowledged. By inviting students from other schools to reflect on each other's work, each school continued the process of collaboration by incorporating alternative perspectives from other young members of their community.



Fig. 2. Students participate at the National Theatre's Speak Up Celebration. 2014,
<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-us/theatre-nation-partnerships/speak-up/>.

The concrete embodiment of abstract, affective dimensions reifies the notion that life is experienced not through the words ascribed to it but through “our senses, our bodies, and only later through language.”⁹⁵ Thus, efficacious articulation of affective occurrences necessitates the manifestation of complex ideas and emotions through modes of physical storytelling, like theatre, that empower individuals to “reexperience” in order to “experiment with change.”⁹⁶ One performer's declaration that “small, little changes are the ones that help us survive” punctuated the experimental changes that are still to be made not only through the work of Speak Up but

⁹⁵ Blatner, 167.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 168.

outside of the program. Though the processes applied in the Speak Up program center on giving voice to young participants and eliciting social change, many of the works devised over the course of the program centered on students' struggles with mental health, feelings of safety in their communities, feelings of isolation, being bullied by their peers, and other moments in which affective overwhelm may occur. By providing young participants with the space to articulate these struggles, the program aided in the formers' exploratory reflection on their authentic experiences and the affect evoked in them.

Tangentially, the aforementioned Leicester Speak Up celebration foregrounded embodied processes by engaging the participants who had devised their own work throughout the year in workshops where they rehearsed alternative modes of expression. Driven by the idea that "you don't have to speak to speak up," the embodied practice of creation inherent in these workshops becomes a mouthpiece for adolescents to express their frustrations and fears without the demand to put those feelings into words.⁹⁷ Through engagement in both physical workshops, like stage combat, and focus-centered workshops, like spoken word and beatboxing, students were able to "fit the energy to the activity" and express their inner chaos without fear of repercussions. In the process of acting out, creatively and behaviorally, students were able to work through the affect tied to past experiences not through verbal articulation but through feeling and action in the moment. While, like the Manchester celebration, groups still presented culminating performances devised throughout the year, the juxtaposition between that which was created in the past and that which was being created in the present through the workshops underlined the importance of continuing the process beyond a "final performance."

⁹⁷ Mr. Shay, Leicester Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

Dramatic Deconstruction of Subjectivity

Deconstructionist approaches to the process of devised theatre work, whether intentional or not, harness the fragmentation that is fundamentally evident in individuals impacted by hostile affective overwhelm. Derrida's notion that "deconstruction mistrusts proper names" and trusts "no generality and no configuration that is solid and given" aptly articulates the means by which approaches to the fragmented psychology of traumatic affect necessitate a rejection of the central narratological estimations of one's past and a singular subjective position from which one builds their perceptual reality and sense of self.⁹⁸ While the chaotic, fracturing characteristics of overwhelming affect are often perceived as something that needs redressing, the application of Derridean deconstructionism to the structure of an established referential framework prompts the transgression of temporal and perspectival boundaries in order to unearth those fractures that emerge from the violent centering of a contradictory, structured reference.

Fragmented Subjectivity

The fragmented subjectivity that emerges in the wake of moments of extreme affective overwhelm resists the structural estimations of cognitive, perceptive, gestural, and mimetic components of the means by which young adolescents navigate the world. Despite the Derridean notion that a "structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself," post-traumatic structures of disrupted linearity, disorientation, and contradiction permeate the subjective topography of one who has been overcome by a wave of inaccessible affect.⁹⁹ During this type of event, time collapses in on itself as it brings the past to bear on the immediate present and suspends one's ability to envision the future. Moreover, temporal fragmentation is not merely

⁹⁸ Derrida, 9.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 83.

relegated to the event itself but continues to alter one's perception of time until the individual is able to come to terms with what they have encountered. Such processes of working-through necessitate an approach that not only acknowledges the inherent fracturing but also investigates its parts in order to piece together a comprehensive subjectivity.

Adoption of a “dissective-cohesive” approach perceives the fragmented shards of traumatic stories as building blocks rather than elements that need to be excised or repressed.¹⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a transcendental unity cannot be realized “without fragmenting into distinct branches, according to irreducible, uncrossable, heterogeneous compositions.”¹⁰¹ Advocating for the incorporation of these shards underlines the necessity of engaging the fragmentary pieces of subjectivity in a continuous state of sporadic, non-linear play. Not unlike performance, this approach accounts for each element or shard as both independent of and a part of the landscape of subjectivity that one finds oneself in. By integrating these elements into therapeutic play, perceptual memory and subjectivity acquire alternative dimensions through which meaning is continuously forged, dismantled, and forged again.

Given that the process of devising is, in itself, concentrated around the fragmentary understanding of theatrical creation, application of this mode of thought bolsters the potential therapeutic capacity of devised theatre processes when approached through the lens of dynamic play. Dynamic, spontaneous play wherein participants are able to negotiate the continuous formation and reformation of subjective topographies cultivates a productive plurality of expression through which generative multiplicities of thought, emotion, and gestuality materialize. As collaborators move through the devising process, the “gestural

¹⁰⁰ Reynolds, Bryan. *Intermedial Theater : Performance Philosophy, Transversal Poetics, and the Future of Affect*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 15.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze and Guattari, 254.

sequences...produce subjects and subjective experience” out of the reflexive practices of remembrance and renegotiation of the otherwise unconscious past.¹⁰² Though they may be working towards the goal of a singular production, the planes of individual experiences and subjectivities are layered as they map out a performative articulation of the collective’s past.

The form taken by the devised production bears the capacity to resist or reassert the repression of shards of subjectivity if it fails to account for the multiplicities that may emerge throughout the process. While many devised productions adhere to a culminating scene format which emphasizes integration and closure, application of an episodic structure or simultaneous stagings more effectively represent the multiplicitous experiences of the diverse collaborators involved in the devising work.¹⁰³ These complex forms and their development, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, relate to a particular plane that operates as a “hidden principle” that determines possible therapeutic, theatrical processes without restricting the potential for play.¹⁰⁴ As the production takes form, transversal movement across subjective and representational boundaries decenters a traditional, theatrical structure that “closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible” further exploration of experiential affect even after the curtain falls.¹⁰⁵

Transversality in Process

¹⁰² Hughes and Parry, 304.

¹⁰³ In an episodic structure, self-contained, loosely connected scenes stand alone as distinct units, while still contributing to the overall storyline of the work; In a simultaneous staging structure multiple locations or events are staged concurrently, allowing the audience to observe them all at the same time.

¹⁰⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 266.

¹⁰⁵ In Félix Guattari's work, transversality refers to a practice that promotes dialogic connection across different directions within a group or institution, subverting hierarchical structures and fostering deterritorialization. It is a way of thinking and acting that resists fixed positions and promotes a dynamic, open-ended exchange of ideas and experiences. Thus, transversal movements occur when any aspect of a parameterization is blurred, crossed, or shattered; Derrida, 83.

Transversal movement across boundaries, be they ideological, subjective, temporal, spatial, or other, resists the “constant crossing out of the young subject’s individual spontaneity” and reconstitutes a referential framework not predicated on restrictive, adult structures but on a sort of fugitive exploration that is “essential for the harmonious completion of his or her development.”¹⁰⁶ Driven from the locus of original perception or a determinate norm, in a moment of fragmentation, the young individual is able to surrender to the productive spontaneity that is so characteristic of adolescence. The act of harnessing this instinctual impulse in the process of devising theatrical performance transforms the work therapeutically as it creates a transitional space wherein the “boundaries between perception and imagination or exteriority and interiority are mediated and renegotiated” through practices of play.¹⁰⁷

It is important to note, however, that play itself is always already caught in a tension, tension between “play and history” and between “play and presence,” as it facilitates the negotiation within the dichotomy of representability and irrepresentability.¹⁰⁸ While some scholars may argue that dramatic work’s presentation of an embodied image reifies the boundaries between what is and is not visible, that which is bodied forth in play serves to blur the line that divides what is consciously and unconsciously known as abstract thoughts and past experiences are brought to the forefront of perceptual subjectivity. Artistic representations’ capacity to deconstruct temporal and visual boundaries constitutes itself as a “counterbalance to ‘sense and order’ against ‘non-sense and disorder.’”¹⁰⁹ Much like one experiences traumatic affect in a nonlinear fashion, as memories attached to that affect become conscious in the present, performative reenactments of the past —whether wholly real or partially reimagined —

¹⁰⁶ Guattari, 95.

¹⁰⁷ Schwab, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, 93.

¹⁰⁹ Muller-Thalheim; quoted in Jones, 16.

resist structural linearity in a way that subjects the past to creative variations or deconstructive distortions.

Devised theatrical processes that highlight deconstructive fragmentation pave the way for uncensored articulations through which participants are able to “break down barriers to embolden students and young audiences.”¹¹⁰ Akin to the expressive work of Speak Up, MCC’s *Uncensored* series uplifts adolescent voices as their past experiences are “woven together to form the fabric” of the performances that have been devised.¹¹¹ Throughout the process, the articulation of antagonistic encounters of racism, sexism, violence, social justice, and class-based discrimination that make “the room shake and like everything is different after that” constitutes the fragmented scenes out of which the play is fashioned.¹¹² Though the processes through which the *Uncensored* series is created do result in a curated performance, the focus of MCC Youth Company’s creation process rests on the devising work itself. Meggan Gomez, MCC’s Director of Public Engagement & Education, emphasized the importance of this focus in an interview:

Process is always, for me, the thing that is most valuable. I've always believed that if you have a strong process, then the product will be great. And what we do still emphasize, though, is that just because process is important to us, we aren't going to not invest in a quality product.¹¹³

The application of an episodic structure that accounts for a multiplicitous array of perspectives deconstructs conventional estimations of theatrical tradition in favor of “facilitating collaborative, freely creative, and diverse theatre-making” for adolescent individuals.¹¹⁴ Allotting

¹¹⁰ Manhattan Class Company (MCC). “*UNCENSORED: SHAKE THE ROOM — Performance Lab.*” YouTube, YouTube, Feb. 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPrBy0tYn_Y.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gomez interview, 2024.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ *BKYC Uncensored Digital Playbill*, 2021.

time for each individual participant to introspectively explore their subjective positionality prompts a “collective assemblages of enunciation” that does not erase individual, fragmented subjectivity but provides the necessary space to rehearse diverse modes of becomings-understood.¹¹⁵

Crossing Affective Boundaries

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio characterizes the feelings of emotion as “composite perceptions” of both “a particular state of body, during actual or simulated emotion” and a state of altered cognitive resources and a deployment of certain mental scripts.”¹¹⁶ If affect itself moves transversally across the dichotomous boundary between body and mind, then deconstructive approaches to affective topographies advocate for the reappraisal of the boundaries erected between what is felt in the present, what is felt in the past, and how it is understood in relation to one’s subjectivity. Active engagement in affective transversality, which explores normative limits, is capable of transforming the emotional ramifications of a given encounter by unsettling these signifying connections during the process of working-through moments of affective overwhelm. This experimental framework runs parallel to that of performance by virtue of its capability of generating expansions of the boundaries of potential gestures.

When affects are displaced from their initial occurrence, the process of re-feeling engenders an affective-becomings through which the transversal movement across “detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” boundaries endeavors to re-map one’s affective

¹¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

¹¹⁶ Damasio, 2010.

topography.¹¹⁷ The destabilization of dichotomous affect, though it arguably threatens the coherence of one's subjectivity, both assuages and encourages a productive uncomfortability of de-territorialization. As the subject passes through various affective and subjective territories, their subject position shifts by virtue of their substitution of one subjectivity for another, or one affect for another. Developmental supplementarity facilitates the productive negotiation of the individual's subjective positionality, perceived as monstrous, as a result of their resistance to the coherent, fixed notion of subjectivity. Aided by the neuroplasticity often exhibited in the adolescent brain, therapeutic creativity fosters a flexible world of possibility in which conscious interventions can be made despite the perceived restrictions to which the participant may subject themselves. The expression of feeling through the reenactment of personal memories in a liminal space, unbound by a determinate affective framework, prompts the navigation of affective authenticity as participants seek to "reimagine and reinvent truths" around what was initially experienced.¹¹⁸

Participation in therapeutic play stimulates recognition and reflective learning by unearthing the affective processes that were once unconscious or inaccessible to the conscious, where they can be addressed with full comprehension. Though not the central purpose of the work, one Speak Up student shared that she "love[s] to use drama as a way of expressing emotion" as it speaks to something that words alone cannot.¹¹⁹ In many of the Speak Up and MCC *Uncensored* performances, mental health issues serve as a key focus around which many participants shared analogous experiences. After learning that at least "twenty percent of young people have mental health problems," the desire to devise a performance centered on adolescent

¹¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 12.

¹¹⁸ Turner-King, Rachel. "Questioning Collaborative Devising in a Post-Truth Era: Crafting Theatre with Youth." *Youth Theatre Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 94–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2019.1688212>, 97.

¹¹⁹ Student participant, Leicester Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

mental health issues led Speak Up participants in Leicester and Havering to share their own struggles. Though each analogous experience was unique to the individual collaborator, one similar thread connected these experiences: when “your trusted adult tells you that you’re too young to understand mental health, it stays in your mind.”¹²⁰

Communication of common experiences not only validated the affect tied to these struggles, affect that had previously been invalidated by adult perspectives, but also promoted an awareness that adolescents are still impacted by intense affect even at an early age, in part because of their uncertain surroundings. The devising process for one of MCC’s recent *Uncensored* productions investigated similar themes as it examined the experiences of “somebody who did a lot of self-harm and who had experienced some really traumatic experiences” not through the lens of “trauma porn,” as Gomez noted, but as a means of working-through those experiences.¹²¹ Presentation of an exploratory space wherein “nothing’s off limits” bolsters a collective awareness of the interior affect that often goes unnoticed in a dynamic environment that “addresses and resolves traumatic material” rather than in a stagnant environment that “may leave the child retraumatized” as they attempt to navigate affective truth through performance.¹²²

Throughout the devising and rehearsal process of a Speak Up performance entitled *Safe/Unsafe*, which unifies media and embodied performance, students staged conflicts in order to discuss what is safe and what is not within their communities. The actors’ repetition of the declaration that “fear follows me, it sometimes takes over” mapped upon the episodic structure of the performance acknowledges the complex nature of fear and its capacity to overwhelm

¹²⁰ Student participants, Havering Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

¹²¹ Gomez interview, 2024.

¹²² Gil, 2006; quoted in Malchiodi, 35.

young individuals and fracture their sense of stability and safety. Expressions of problematic material through performance “changes the relationship to the problems or feelings” as “real fear is [c]onverted into fictional fear” that can be more easily confronted.¹²³ Boal’s work suggests that the consistent rehearsal of events, whether real or metaphorical, affords the opportunity to acquire “insight into the qualities of the emotion and how it functions positively or negatively” in one’s life.¹²⁴ Through each reciprocal enactment, the collaborator is able to relive the scene with “re-emotion” as a means of emotional experimentation.¹²⁵

If it is “through lived emotion that the child develops... their own emotional regulation,” then it follows that rehearsal of embodied, emotional expression is necessary to effectively explore and work through troubling affective overwhelm.¹²⁶ As young collaborators enact encounters defined by fear, creative performativity serves as a vehicle for transversal movement across affective boundaries and the navigation of the resultant embodied, emotional complexity. Embodied rehearsal is not only the practice of play itself, but the rehearsal of the feelings associated with that encounter that may surface throughout the performance. In crossing the borders between rigid estimations of emotional states, the dimensions of one’s affective topographies “increase with the number of connections that are made on it” as the supplementarity of signification changes the meaning ascribed to a given feeling.¹²⁷

As new emotions surface and expand the dimensionality of one’s emotional capacity, chains of affective expression move beyond singular definitions of emotion (happiness, sadness, fear) through the negotiation of the intricate nuances of such experiences. Situation of an

¹²³ Jones, 15.

¹²⁴ Blatner, 167.

¹²⁵ Boal, 25.

¹²⁶ Elliott, Victoria, and Nicole Dingwall. “Roles as a Route to Being ‘Other’: Drama-Based Interventions with at-Risk Students.” *Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2017, pp. 66–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2017.1290875>, 70.

¹²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 9.

individual back into a state of affective overwhelm, particularly one that is not bound by the same affective borders, elucidates the inextricable link between physical postures, movement, and sensation, and the emotional state that emerges as usable material in the therapeutic process. Presentations of the devised theatrical production engender the evolution of affective responses as participants reflect on and engage with the image and the “reminiscences it evokes, the things that the images say to us, and the things that we say to them are always closely attuned to physical qualities.”¹²⁸ Dialogic encounters between the image and the self through what Gabrielle Schwab terms “embodied language of affects” fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of one’s affective topography and the notable influence it has on the young individual’s ability to regulate cognition, creativity, and emotion.

Agential Transversality

Itself the prelude to reconstruction, deconstruction of cognitive and affective topographies resituates the individual on what Deleuze and Guattari term the “*plane of consistency* of multiplicities,” which increases in dimensionality with the numerous connections made on it.¹²⁹ With the reintroduction of repressed affect, the deterritorialization of a singular emotional state expands the potential for supplementary connections that may be made across affective boundaries, constituting assemblages determined not by what a young individual is told they should feel but by what they themselves know to be true. Though the title of *Speak Up’s Safe/Unsafe* gestures towards a dichotomy of feeling, as one either feels safe or does not, the

¹²⁸ McNiff, 57.

¹²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari define a “plane of consistency of multiplicity” as an “immense Abstract Machine, abstract yet real and individual; its pieces are the various assemblages and individuals, each of which groups together an infinity of particles entering into an infinity of more or less interconnected relations,” Deleuze and Guattari, 254; Ibid, 9.

devising process enabled adolescents to diversify the connections made between being and knowing through a recapitulation of the two definitions. The transformative and expansive power of transversal movement surpasses the limitations of restrictive, objective frameworks, imbuing the young participant with agency over emergent connections that may be formed on this plane of consistency based on their observations and comprehension.

Agential power over the structure of feeling, as embodied in a performative mode, solidifies the individual's capacity to explore beyond the ramifications of a previously established codifying framework. Renee Emunah propounds that, in dramatic processes, adolescents "often have little patience for planning, yet are eager to present ideas for scenes."¹³⁰ Impulsive articulations of authentic affective overwhelm, when not stunted by restrictive expectations, empowers the adolescent to embark on a sort of fugitive exploration of their past, present, and future as they spontaneously move from one scenario to another or from one affective state to another. Much like the early processes of *Speak Up* and *Uncensored*, therapeutic devised theatre proffers access to an adolescent's creative spontaneity and possibility in a space characterized by liberation from engrained patterns of thought and behavior. The freedom inherent in play, when accompanied by the emotional immediacy of theatrical reenactment, works to dismantle the "old machinery to which they belong" and, out of the fractured shards, fashion an alternative subjectivity over which they have a determinate authority that they "rarely have in [their] day-to day-life."¹³¹ Devised theatre praxes, at their core, begin not with a solid codifying framework but with the abstract, not unlike experiences of affective overwhelm. Given the parallel nature between the two, the former serves as an effective means by which to work through the latter in a way that does not reify traumatic implications.

¹³⁰ Emunah, 123.

¹³¹ Student participant, Havering Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

Rather, the external embodiment of one's interior topographies opens the individual up to alternative, referential lines of flight through which one can determine their signification surrounding emotions.

Affective, Exploratory Distance in Theatrical Processes

If we are to operate under the assumption that the affect elicited in direct experience is unmediated, it follows that the interpretive frames through which one comes to manufacture meaning, to maintain a sense of continuity, are rendered relatively ineffectual in an experience of affective overwhelm. These interpretive frames serve as spaces in which links of associations contrive disparate meanings through supplementary signification. In an attempt to establish order within subjective territories, the situation of associative links within the interpretive frames shape perspective as one reflects on the experience. When faced with the removal of a previously held referential framework, the individual entrenched in excessive affect scrambles to redefine themselves by traversing subjective boundaries through transversal play. However, it is in the re-immersion into a state of unmediated and monstrous, implosive affects that productive transversality is most effectively mobilized.

This is, in part, a result of the fact that play maintains certain regulations that inhibit the monstrous capacities of our limitless potential to become something else entirely. In effect, transversality liberates the subject inasmuch as it undermines or exceeds a subjective territory determined by outside frameworks. The fractured temporal space of reenactment, a transversal experience in itself, initiates a simultaneous fracturing of subjectivity that, rather than vacillating between two repressive subject positions, enters into a continuous substitution of disparate multiplicitous affective re-livings by which the adolescent actor at play, an agent of multiplicity, forms and reforms conscious subjectivities. Expressive representation, in its diverse forms,

maintains a consequential agency over the production of alternate realities of the self and its relationality with its environment.

While theatrical, therapeutic techniques like drama therapy and psychodrama have, in part, turned to reenactment as part of their process, the reliance on meaning and mastery that scholars and practitioners often strive for renders the individual subject to the violent act of centering and, consequently, threatens the authenticity of the experience. Drama-based expressivity does, in fact, function as a catalyst for the transversal exploration of subjectivity, identity, and perception. Yet, when expressivity is stifled by a need to make meaning out of an experience that affects the subject in ways that cannot be perceived or articulated in the moment, tensions arise between a negative, perceptual subjectivity shaped in trauma and a prospective alternative perceptual subjectivity that one strives to accept in the aftermath of a given event. To distance oneself from the originary event through re-staging it in the creative third space resists this dichotomous perception by encouraging theatrical involvement that is oriented towards reflection and thought.

Therapeutic Dimensions of Dramatic Distance

Somatic responses to the remembrance of affective overwhelm necessitate nonverbal therapeutic methods in which emotional distance from the initial event is afforded. Therapeutic theatricality, not unlike traditional drama therapy praxes, fosters this distance through the intentional shift between two distinct continuums: one that ranges from fictional enactments to more true-to-life enactments and another that ranges from enactments performed in front of an audience to those that are not. As collaborators navigate these continuums, the distance stimulates the alteration of the perceptual position from which young individuals approach material that may be deemed traumatic. Dramatic fictionalization of an overwhelming situation through metaphor removes the situation and its complex, intense emotions from the plane of

cognitive reality so that it can be safely expressed by converting painful experiences into artistic material. Thus, the process of therapeutic devising allows the young individual to alternate between dealing with it directly and participating in imaginative projects intended to distract them from the overwhelming affect of the moment.

Uncensored participants exemplified this oscillation between reenactment and play in their work as collaborators transform moments of uncomfortable or traumatic affect into imagined scenes. One participant devised a scene in which she went on a Tinder date with Christopher Columbus. Through the scene, the Afro-Latina adolescent confronts Columbus with “all of the ways in which he screwed up everything” and notes his response as a “whiny like boy who starts crying when you kind of, you know, like talk to him.”¹³² As the scene developed throughout the devising process, the amalgamation of comedic elements with discourses of race and class allows the individual to navigate the problematic structures that impact her day-to-day as a means of challenging oppressive frameworks that continue to persist across temporal boundaries:

And you’re nothing like the big bad wolf in my head. You’re just pathetic. You’re not untouchable. You’re a coward awkwardly clinging on to hit. I spent so much time in therapy ranting about the trauma I live with, that we all live with, all that discomfort just for the man to be nothing more than a fucking coward.¹³³

This fictionalized encounter elicits a sense of agency in the young girl as she was able to reconfigure that which had determined her perception of the world around her. Embodied remembrance of the impact that these structures have made on one’s contemporary perception enables the collaborator to work through her understanding of the historical precedents upon

¹³² Gomez interview, 2024.

¹³³ MCC, 7:20-8:02.

which her own traumatic affect is predicated. Transformation of oppressive, distressing affect into a theatrical play provides a protective safeguard through which one can come to terms with how structures of the past continue to impact the collaborator's present moment.



Fig. 3. MCC's *Uncensored: Shake the Room*, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPrBy0tYn_Y.

From outside the normative plane of reference, theatrical exploration challenges the individual's tolerance for emotional expression and regulation. When this point of tolerance is reached, the distance expands the individual's capacity to cope with the emotions that they encounter by decreasing the affective weight of the moment. Bessel Van der Kolk asserts that the distance allotted by transversal movement of theatrical devising work prompts therapeutic observation and analysis of "sensations and emotions without becoming hyper aroused or engaging in avoidance maneuvers."¹³⁴ Effective experimentation with affective material and the responses that it elicits necessitates immunity from real-life consequences like punishment or judgment. Scaffolded within a framework of safety, the theatrical therapeutic process is

¹³⁴ Van der Kolk, Bessel A. "The Neurobiology of Childhood Trauma and Abuse." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2003, pp. 293–317, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993\(03\)00003-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993(03)00003-8), 187.

alleviated and strengthened by the paced and progressive unfurling of the stories told about moments of affective overwhelm. Unlike a finite and scripted performance, the constant experimentation within the devising process exonerates the collaborator from fear of failure and getting the play “right.” Removal of the sense of theatrical right and wrong sanctions the essential flexibility and spontaneity that permits “them to be in their bodies and not stick in their heads” as they try to find closure through meaning.¹³⁵

Dramatic work intended to produce closure is often propelled by a desire to alleviate pure, intense affects by integrating them into one’s comprehensive narratological estimation of the self and conscious behavioral structure so they may overcome the past and envision a future predicated on hope. Jill Dolan suggests that performance is intended to “make us feel hope and possibility” for a future unmarred by a traumatic past.¹³⁶ Given that, in most cases, performances have a finite ending, the practice itself infers a false hope for a conclusion that is often not attainable in the face of intense, distressing affect. Perception of the staged piece as a conclusion to the therapeutic process renders the performance “‘hollow’ (and therefore safely ‘infelicitous’ in Austin’s terms)” as it seeks to preserve the past rather than acknowledge it as a point of reference from which future resilience to affective overwhelm can be developed.¹³⁷ The hollow performances devised in theatrical processes, while they may have an ending that gestures at amelioration of problematic affect, fail to encapsulate the overwhelming complexity of one’s subjectivity, particularly when subjected to an overstimulation of codes.

¹³⁵ Hammond, Nick. *Forum Theatre for Children: Enhancing Social, Emotional and Creative Development*. Institute of Education Press, 2015, 20.

¹³⁶ Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. 2009-09-03 20:30, University of Michigan Press, 2008, *HathiTrust*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015062870285, 95.

¹³⁷ Pellegrini, Ann. and Karen Shimakawa. “Reenactability.” *Law and Performance*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2018, pp. 101-121, 108.

Even in cases where the performance is developed over time, the assumption of a resolution in efforts to “replace aspects of the play that are now resolved” denies the efficacy of continuous working-through by situating the performance as a desired end rather than a step in the process.¹³⁸ This is not to say that amelioration of the effects of trauma is impossible; Rather, attempts at working through affective overwhelm necessitate a balance between maintaining the openness of the process while also acknowledging when the process should be oriented towards a loose structure, though not a sense of finality. Conclusiveness, like in scripts constructed through culminating scenes or linear narrative, suppress aspects of individual and authentic experiences by advocating for that which “fits” into the final story that the playwright or director is trying to tell. The concept of dramatic distance, while important in therapeutic theatre praxes, should not be perceived as an agent of resolution or mastery over one’s affective topography but as an instrument employed in the continual process of working-through.

Grasping at Mastery through Meaning

In traditional drama therapy work, the primary objective is often centered on the containment of emotion through expression with no real-world consequences. Containment advocates, above all else, for mastery over one’s emotions through the cathartic release of affects that are perceived to have negative effects on the individual’s cognition and behavior. If, as some scholars understand it, resistance to emotional expression is often associated with a “fear of losing control,” then the simultaneous encounter of intense affect and control of the expression of that affect should be the key therapeutic factor in dramatic praxes.¹³⁹ The obfuscation of

¹³⁸ Gopalakrishna, Maitri, and Shabari Rao. “Performance, Revelation and Resistance: Interweaving the Artistic and the Therapeutic in Devised Theatre.” *Indian Theatre Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, pp. 83–90, https://doi.org/10.1386/itj.1.1.83_3, 85.

¹³⁹ Emunah, 22.

boundaries between interior and exterior experiences, between affect and embodiment, accounts for the complex implications of overwhelming affect. As adolescents practice creative intervention, the shift in their subjective position from one of victim to one of master or conqueror over uncertain situations seeks to develop competency in verbally processing their work for the sake of counteracting helplessness against the demands of disruptive affect.

Nonetheless, the centralization of a “locus of control,” even when contextualized within a disillusionment of boundaries, reasserts a reliance on meaning that often can’t be made out of inarticulatory experiences.¹⁴⁰ Assemblance of seemingly disparate life events into a singular narrative constitutes a thread that provides significant insight into the impact of distressing affect driven by the impulse to “fit together” the fractured shards of subjectivity, reality, and identity into the temporal order of narrative memory through collective encodings.¹⁴¹ As layers of experiential knowledge are mapped upon one another, the emergent phenomenological meaning takes shape as collaborators “find their own associations, meaning and interpretation” through a process of supplementary signification.¹⁴² Nonetheless, the conclusions reached in this expression may or may not be fully representative of the participant’s original, complex experience, as it is influenced by the facilitator and witnesses.

The impulse in therapeutic work is often to organize the “reiterative, messy process” of devising theatre in order to create insights into inarticulatory experiences.¹⁴³ However, succumbing to this impulse toward the finite fails to acknowledge the therapeutic potential in the continuous process of “meaning-making and unmaking [that] occur on a micro-level each time

¹⁴⁰ Malchiodi, 233.

¹⁴¹ Guattari, 71.

¹⁴² Jones, 153.

¹⁴³ Turner-King, 100.

we interact or share ideas.”¹⁴⁴ This processual production of meaning marks an intriguing point of exploration when interrogating devised theatre as a means of therapy. It is in these moments that the complex exploration of emotion and perception is not only possible but exceedingly fruitful as the emotional immediacy of performative expression reseats the individual into the affective overwhelm of the original event with the purpose of working-through. By inviting “monsters into their play,” be they cognitive and physical elements of ideas, perspective, gestures, abilities, knowledge, truth, etc., rather than using play to excise, those monsters become the therapeutic materials that are put into action in order to facilitate a consistent process of.¹⁴⁵

Working-Through in Theatrical Processes

Paradoxical approximations of therapeutic processes imply that the material used in the attempted amelioration of distressing affect and thought is the same material that initially causes harm, which the body and mind endeavor to safeguard against. Yet, the ability to communicate that material through aesthetic means exhumes unconscious memories and the emotions that such events carry with them in order to interject authentic experiential knowledge of that which, despite previous suppression, influences the subjectivity of the individual. Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber lauds creative reconstruction of a distressing event as “indispensable in helping the patient to understand the ‘language of the body’” or the script that has been inscribed upon it.¹⁴⁶ It is this understanding, Leuzinger-Bohleber concludes, that creates space within which the meanings of embodied affect may be brought into consciousness, worked through effectively,

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Malchiodi, 227.

¹⁴⁶ Leuzinger-Bohleber, xxxiii.

and, ultimately, expressed. This psychoanalytic, linguistic consideration renders the body subject to reductive oversimplification and the “pitfalls of speculative frameworks.”¹⁴⁷

Rather, the implementation of creative embodiments driven not by a linguistic framework but by purely felt affective dimensions, notably with adolescents, promotes the transformation of problematic material into productive possibilities for the future. The almost inherent potential for young people to reenact past encounters through creative expression serves as the foundational principle upon which understandings of the curative capacity of theatrical play are predicated. Influenced by Jung’s theoretical principle that therapeutic processes are less “a question of treatment than of developing the creative possibilities latent in the patient himself,” exploratory investigations into the therapeutic ramifications of creation situates the latter not as therapy itself but as a process in which therapy is a recurrent byproduct.¹⁴⁸ As young individuals, whether child or adolescent, engage in practices of play, the aesthetic space upon which they map embodied and affective dimensions serves as a laboratory wherein collaborators venture to mitigate overwhelming affect without reliance on perfect wholeness or absolute catharsis.

Play, at its core, generates imaginary representations of interior elements which resist totalization in favor of what Derrida describes as a “field of infinite substitutions,” wherein memory represented through imaginative methodologies is negotiated and the distressing affect associated with those memories might be worked through according to the convictions of the adolescent participant.¹⁴⁹ Approaches to painful, often demanding content through enactment involve an agential shift in one’s subjective position from object of another’s perception to the subject of one’s own, or from passive character to active director. Traditional therapeutic

¹⁴⁷ Guattari, 81.

¹⁴⁸ Jung, C. G. *Practice of Psychotherapy: Essays on the Psychology of Transference and Other Subjects*. Translated by Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, Second ed., vol. 16, Routledge, 1966, 68.

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, 91.

processes often suggest “doing something to the participants,” as is the case when the therapist provides meaning for the patient, rather than “doing something with the participants.”¹⁵⁰ As creation counters the powerlessness felt in moments of affective overwhelm, the act of positioning the theatrical devising process within a largely therapeutic, perceptual framework constitutes an authoritative process of working-through experiences which, in the past, individuals have previously had none.¹⁵¹ Invention of an alternative subjective position resists the reductive perception of experiences in which certain components are denied or repressed and enables adolescents to body forth personal inclinations or aspirations as the individuals work through complex affective topographies.

Implementation of collaborative devised theatre in therapeutic processes evokes personal, sometimes risky ideas and interpretations that spontaneously erupt as collaborators engage in spontaneous play. Translation of these emergent affects into performance, particularly that which is unscripted, necessitates the representation of “complex, fluid, and shifting discursive and embodied subject positions” as they enter their memories into the collaborative discourse.¹⁵² In the Tinder scene in *Uncensored: Shake the Room*, the translation of distressing experiences into an imaginary configuration remains haunted by the originary affect. The student’s fictive date with Christopher Columbus conveys personal encounters with racial and class-based discrimination faced in her real-world experiences. The casting of a historical figure in present relational encounters reifies the fictive as an effective means of processing the implications of confrontations with her contemporaries that may carry with them unsettling, troublesome affect. As the collective worked through this encounter, other analogous stories emerged as

¹⁵⁰ Harden et al, 76.

¹⁵¹ Malchiodi, 91.

¹⁵² Rogers et al., 113; Quoted in Turner-King, 98.

collaborators placed their own experiences in direct conversation with the initial imaginative representation.

Entrance into a state of play allowed each collaborator the space to express the interior affect felt in the wake of racist or classist encounters. One participant sought to represent her experience “wearing a hijab and what it is like to be a Muslim girl in New York City and the different misconceptions of that” while another expressed a fictive enactment of the “ghosts in her house” and her attempts to explain the situation to her mother despite the language barrier, speaking to intergenerational traumatic experiences and the affect that persists as a result.¹⁵³

Though represented in disparate ways, entrance into a collaborative space of play through the devising process provides an opportunity for participants to employ the art as a proxy for the discovery of the affect hidden beneath these performative modes of expression. Situation of these encounters in conversation with one another, particularly within the theatrical sphere, grants collaborators the opportunity to work through the prolonged implications of affective overwhelm that may emerge in the process of expressing distressing experiences through embodied practices. Nonhierarchical, collaborative methods of theatrical devising not only develop the adolescent participant’s sense of authority but also provides space for the therapeutic working-through of a troublesome past.

¹⁵³ Gomez interview, 2024.



Fig. 4. MCC's *Uncensored: Shake the Room*, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPrBy0tYn_Y.

Given the nuanced definition of what constitutes therapeutic activity, the paradoxical approximation of distressing material straddles the line between working through that material and being overwhelmed by it. In conjuring up painful memories for the sake of reenactment, the potential for what Freud terms “deterioration during treatment” becomes more potent as abstract moments of traumatizing affect are ossified; however, when therapeutic processes advocate for working *with* distressing affect rather than against it, as is the case in therapeutic devised theatre, the shards of a difficult past are converted into usable content for a constructive future that affirms rather than threatens one’s sense of security and authority.¹⁵⁴ Bert States posits that if something is to be remembered, it must be “remembered not as *what* happened but as what has happened *again* in a different way and will surely happen again in the future in still another way.”¹⁵⁵ States’ reference to repetitive remembrance gestures towards a recapitulation of the past through a deconstructed, alternative codifying framework that is oriented towards a future that may be encountered.

¹⁵⁴ Freud, Sigmund. “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through.” *The Complete Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vintage, 2001, 152; Saketopoulou, Avgi. “Trauma Lives Us: Affective Excess, Safe Spaces and the Erasure of Subjectivity,” *Bully Bloggers*, 2014, 3.

¹⁵⁵ States; quoted in Carlson 3.

Exploration of Meaning and Codification

Despite the contention that is often considered between the two, creative instinct is “as much destruction as construction” in the process of theatrical working-through.¹⁵⁶ The development of creative agency often necessitates, first and foremost, the disillusionment of determinate yet restrictive codifying frameworks centered on traditional perception and logic. Reflective deconstruction of memories into fragments “lift[s] experiences out of their contexts” so that they might be defined not by what precedes or succeeds it but by how it is felt and understood by the individual in the moment. Advocation for “chaos rather than order” in the process of creative devising makes space for the re-negotiation of one’s subjective map as adolescent participants expand their affective and cognitive lines of flight.¹⁵⁷ As the past is re-performed, new connections are formed and create alternative insertion points of experiential knowledge influenced by one’s current subjective position rather than the position they held during the original occurrence. These insertion points are not intended to “fill in the gap between past and present” in order to discover an underlying meaning but to determine what can be gleaned from the past as its material is worked through.¹⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the formation of meaning out of affective overwhelm, in which complete comprehension is typically denied, is often determined by verbal interpretation, as is the case with traditional talk therapy. Ascription of meaning onto that which the body feels and expresses is codified by verbalized memories that have shaped one’s subjectivity in the present. As perception is altered in the process of devising reenactments of memory, the framework through

¹⁵⁶ Jung, C.G. “Psychological Factors Determining Human Behaviour.” *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Volume 8: Structure & Dynamics of the Psyche, Princeton University Press, 2014, 118.

¹⁵⁷ McNiff, 63.

¹⁵⁸ Pellegrini and Shimakawa, 112.

which the past is understood simultaneously adjusts in accordance with new experiential knowledge that emerges in the process of facing one's past. The integration of embodied memories into a devised performance through repetitive rehearsal invokes a re-transcription not of verbal interpretations but of sensory, affective experience. This re-transcription of affect does not discount what is felt in the originary event; Rather, it works to produce a comprehensive account of the complex affects that may not be experienced or understood in their entirety. Repetition in therapeutic processes maintains the individual's entrenchment in overwhelming affect in order to foster the absorption of insight embedded in the event, insight that Guattari notes "eludes all the orders which are said to be 'structured like language.'" ¹⁵⁹

Minimization of the linguistic structure as an interpretive framework, particularly in the theatrical devising process, makes space for an "interpretive community" in which there is a "significant overlap of such memory" shared between collaborators. ¹⁶⁰ Interpretation through the overlap of analogous narratives, much like in the case of *Uncensored: Shake the Room*, prompts a processual analysis of the unfolding scene that is not subjected to a singular domain but that traverses its boundaries in favor of more extensive exploration of meanings that may be uncovered in a given encounter. Examination through play, especially theatre activities, empowers young participants to share their inner thoughts and feelings, scrutinize public meanings that often try to assert control over individual subjectivities, and facilitate affective possibilities of 'doings' that reshape the potential meaning of past events. ¹⁶¹ Ellie Hart, Speak Up Project Manager, stated that young participants devised disparate yet connected modes of artistic

¹⁵⁹ Guattari, 83.

¹⁶⁰ Carlson, 3.

¹⁶¹ Dolan, 6.

expression in order to “process what they are going through” and, as a result, form new codifying connections out of the fragmented stories that emerge.¹⁶²

By playing out multiple interpretations of encounters driven by racism, sexism, and other problematic structures, collaborators “gradually achieve transparency, without sacrificing complexity and texture.”¹⁶³ One particular performance, devised by an all-girls school in Leicester, reworked Chicago’s “Cell Block Tango” as a vehicle for the expression of encounters of gender-based discrimination. As the performance took shape, students shared experiences of catcalling, work-based discrimination, sexual assault, and unrealistic gender expectations that link the past, their memories, with the present, the consistent impact of those events, and impose layers of contingent meaning onto each encounter. Each young collaborator’s perspective haunted the way in which representations of gender-based discrimination are visually encoded and understood not only by those who witnessed the performance but by the students themselves. In this case, as in many others, there is no singular meaning; Instead, there is a “ghostly ballet of alternative ‘meanings’ which various modes of figuration provide” as they are explored in the theatrical space.¹⁶⁴ Continuous engagement in this “ghostly ballet” establishes links that shift the perspectives of collaborators and witnesses while emphasizing the means by which one can unearth personal significance of individual expressions. Meaning born out of the affects inherent in these re-feelings, if indeed meaning can be reached, shifts over time and, thus, the negotiation of assemblages or byproducts of connectivity ensures that the individual may work towards therapeutic ends but can never return the young collaborator to what they once were.

¹⁶² Hart interview, 2024.

¹⁶³ Emunah, 129.

¹⁶⁴ Kleinberg, 16.



Fig. 5. Leicester Speak Up Celebration, 2024, curveonline.co.uk

Links established between one's life experiences and the disparate, alternative meanings that emerge in processes of play work towards the formation of new meaningfulness in their lives as they orient themselves to the future rather than try to make sense of the past. A key objective in the deployment of therapeutic creative interventions is often to uncover the symbolic meaning in the embodied material. Yet, this key objective fails to consider that the collaborators are "themselves units of meanings."¹⁶⁵ Adherence to this estimation of the individual advocates not for the construction of a restrictive meaning that one may attempt to establish out of distressing affective experiences but emphasizes the engagement with the embodied image itself. In prioritizing the process over the meaning produced, the therapeutic potential is most potent in the "infusion of imagination and awareness" rather than in any specific conclusion that may be reached.¹⁶⁶ At its most effective, the production created over the course of the devising process should not present a finite conclusion but challenge the protagonist to continue the process of working-through instances of affective overwhelm in a way that is meaningful for the collaborator in the contemporary moment.

¹⁶⁵ Brison, 49.

¹⁶⁶ McNiff, 3.

By leaving the production open for further exploration, the continuous process of working-through transforms verbal interpretation of the past and the meaning made out of it into “compassionate feeling, sensitive perception, and expression of emotions.”¹⁶⁷ Movement beyond meaning, or a strict estimation of what is meant by a word, text, or action, foregrounds the meaningfulness of theatrical devising and the scenes created in its process. Meaningfulness, at its core, refers to the subjective experience of having significance or the feeling that something matters in one’s actions. Though there are relational dimensions to the notion, determinations of meaningfulness from one person to the next are not always synonymous. Therefore, efforts to create meaningfulness in the devising process acknowledges the significance that a given experience has on the individual’s broader subjectivity. Unlike reductive estimations of meaning, meaningfulness goes beyond the superficial in favor of a deeper understanding of the past and its impact on the present. Application of meaningfulness in therapeutic processes, which is “still within the control of an individual,” renders it a source of resilience that often serves as the goal for working through distressing affect.¹⁶⁸

Assessing the Play-Drama Continuum

Fluidity in what Phil Jones terms the “*play-drama continuum*” lends itself to a non-linear theatrical process in which an individual may, at one moment, move forward and, at other moments, be thrust backwards.¹⁶⁹ Continuous shifts across this continuum suggests that the devising of a theatrical production, particularly one with therapeutic ends, necessitates a certain

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 66.

¹⁶⁸ Patterson, Paul, and Persephone Sextou. “‘Trapped in the Labyrinth’: Exploring Mental Illness through Devised Theatrical Performance.” *Medical Humanities*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2017, pp. 86–91, <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2016-011094>, 90.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, 11.

flexibility that is not always present in traditional forms of therapy. Stories that rest on this continuum, often perceived as “metaphor[s] for their issues, concerns, hopes and dreams,” generate lines of discursive thought that work to facilitate what Augusto Boal terms “simultaneous dramaturgy.”¹⁷⁰

This simultaneous dramaturgy enables collaborators to present a theatrical enactment that chronicles a problem while concurrently staging potential solutions. Presentation of a juxtaposition between definitive problems and prospective solutions allows the participant to hold multiple truths at once, all of which resonate on a personal level, whether real or imagined. Concretization of this complexity reifies the negative implications of overwhelming affect while also bodying forth the resilience that results from coming face-to-face with that affect. By embracing the complex dimensions of such encounters in the devising process, collaborators resist plot-oriented theatrical traditions in favor of semi-improvised vignettes that permit the interjection of new lines and actions as the production unfolds.



Fig. 6. MCC's *Uncensored: Shake the Room*, 2024, , www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPrBy0tYn_Y.

¹⁷⁰ Blatner, 171; Boal, Augusto. *The Rainbow of Desire : The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*. Routledge, 1995, 3.

Adolescent collaborator, in the process of devising *Uncensored: Shake the Room* sought to stage a multitude of episodic scenes, including music, dance, and dramatic performances, which are representative of diverse modes of authentic expression through which young individuals articulate traumatic or overwhelming memories. Prefacing the performance with fragmented assertion of phrases they have heard from the adults in their lives gestures at authentic articulations of internalized, somewhat oppressive statements.¹⁷¹ By foregrounding these statements without reaching any central conclusion, the young participants establish the space of play in which the successive stories are able to be articulated and addressed. In one episodic scene, the simultaneous stagings of two participants' experiences speak to the analogous nature of fearful encounters while giving each collaborator the opportunity to work through the resultant affect individually:

Student One

Sound in the air
It has got to be a firework.
Mistake one brother man.
If you hear a pop,
Run whether or not it's a firework.
Maybe I should have listened
If I did, I wouldn't be staring
down the barrel of a gun,
With hot smoke coming from the
chamber
The body is falling in
slow motion for me.
Why is he crippling
What the hell is going on?

Student Two

I see the red and blue lights flashing as I walk home.
Are they coming for them?
I need church right now. I need guidance.
What just happened?
Nobody was ready.
Why did they do this to me? I ask God.
It's 2:00 am.¹⁷²

The juxtaposition of two experiences, one from an African American male and another from a Hispanic female, speaks to a shared moment of affective overwhelm as they face encounters marked by fear. The distinction between recapitulation of enacted violence and the articulation of

¹⁷¹ MCC, 3:09-3:11.

¹⁷² MCC, 23:29-30:00.

traumatic responses and subsequent search for therapeutic solutions in the aftermath allows the collaborators to reflect on their past and the impact that persists in its wake. The production's continuous transitions between scenes, staged both simultaneously and in isolation, leave open the conversations that are initiated throughout the play.

Opposition to closure in performance generates a level of immediacy in the processual working-through of the material presented in the theatrical space, situating the performance as part of a process that continues beyond the boundaries of the performance. Herein lies the therapeutic significance not just of drama or performance-based therapies in a broad sense but, more notably, of devised theatre work. The use of devised theatre in working with adolescents who face overwhelming, inarticulatory affect necessitates a free flow of associations that respects the individual perspectives presented during the brainstorming stage. Such free-flowing associations prompt the formation of re-embodied images that are charged with "all the emotional intensity stored up within the [collaborator] at a given moment."¹⁷³ As is the case with MCC's *Uncensored* series and National Theatre's Speak Up program, opportunities to body forth multiplicitous stories driven by contemporary affect resist singular estimations of how affective overwhelm is experienced in adolescence. The play culminates with a monologue that outlines the means by which roots that "seep down into the earth as memories are created. They are all connected, no matter if it's happy, sad, silly, or bad. Every root touches the earth, everything happens, everything happens for a reason. These moments, memories, stories, narratives, all mean something, even if that something is nothing."¹⁷⁴ Such an articulation of roots is an apt estimation for the means by which each lived experience and affect felt plays a role in the development of adolescents, their perceptual subjectivity, and, ultimately, their

¹⁷³ Brenton, 68; quoted in McNiff, 47.

¹⁷⁴ MCC, 35:09-36:10.

understanding of their own identity. The authentic expression of affective complexity does not seek to contain the emotional intensity of a moment that is both past and present but to harness it for therapeutic purposes.

Though equally collaborative, the previous distinctions made between National Theatre's product-driven Connections plays and National Theatre's process-driven Speak Up program are evident in the transcription and codification practices employed by each project. Subjection of emergent material to the codifying structure of the script removes the personal elements of the stories, as it emphasizes the key thematic element more generally. Where differentiation does arise is still bound by the sub-codes that emerge as initial codifications are compared, and the final scripted performance begins to take shape. While, on some level, themes are often reviewed and modified in conversation with collaborators, it is easy for that discourse to remain centered on a singular, thematic principle. This is not to say that the process of devising a script is inherently untherapeutic. It merely suggests the need for caution when approaching personal, affectively charged stories through a thematic, codifying lens. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge that notation of that which is shared in the devising process within a scripted format cannot represent or express the affective or embodied elements of one's experience and, therefore, can never truly be made complete.

Moreover, the emphasis placed on embodied enactment in *Uncensored: Shake the Room* and other similar projects, prompts an analysis that is driven not by attempts to narrativize solidified meaning but by codification through the body and its affective dimensions. As the past is bodied forth, the participants return to and reflect on the affect felt in the initial occurrence and are, therefore, "affectively saturate[d] and re-code[d]" by the dialogic performance of authentic

and personal past, present, and future experiential knowledge.¹⁷⁵ Determination of analysis through unique experiential knowledge, in conversation with but not subsumed by others, reaffirms the significance of fostering comprehension of one's subjective position and the influence it has on one's broader subjectivity. Such work, as it progresses, continues to make space for the productive renegotiation of key factors in adolescent development, namely facets of reality and identity that persist long after the collaborative work seems to conclude.

Coda: Dialogic Performance as Planes of Negotiation

Manifestations of phenomenological affect through artistic play situate aesthetic discourse as a key factor in the therapeutic negotiation of subjective positions and the knowledge that can be gained from it. The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies defines dialogic performance as “a way of having intimate conversations with other people and cultures” through embodied praxes.¹⁷⁶ The expansion of subjectivity is gained not by distanced observation of one's environment and the relational encounters one faces but through active engagement with the differential becomings that occur as one moves within the world around them. The situation of a collaboratively created theatrical production as a space for dialogue between self and others, through which this exploration is possible, opens an individual's plane of subjectivity to expansion as aesthetic material and discursive elements reciprocally shape one another.

Dialogic performance, to borrow Dwight Conquergood's term, employs both aesthetic materials and discursive elements in order to foster collaborative discourse where experiential, embodied knowledge can be exchanged and understood.¹⁷⁷ While many associate this discursive

¹⁷⁵ Pellegrini and Shimakawa, 108.

¹⁷⁶ Dolan, 340.

¹⁷⁷ Dwight Conquergood, and E. Patrick Johnson. “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance.” *Cultural Struggles*. University of Michigan Press, 2013, 5.

practice with meaning-making, as is the case with therapeutic processes, its fecundity lies in its movement beyond the one-way transmission of information, as is often the case with a theatrical production, opting instead for the emphasis of mutual understanding and influence. By privileging dialogue through motion rather than dialogue strictly through words, dialogic performance seeks to connect the self and the other, while it simultaneously holds them apart through dramatic distance, as a means of facilitating productive debate. Conquergood explicates the potential for dialogic performance to resist conclusions as it is intensely committed to maintaining open and ongoing conversation between two distinctive individuals or groups involved in the process of devising and the dialogue that may occur afterward.¹⁷⁸

Attempts to maintain the openness or incompleteness of a story through material expression orient the work not strictly in the past, through remembrance, or in the present, through performance, but toward the future and the prolonged impact the dialogic performance may have as a constantly shifting landscape of multiplicitous responses and perspectives. Employment of a dialogical perspective in the theatrical realm elucidates the shifts in subjectivity that occur through “ongoing exigencies of relational work and participants’ retrospective sensemaking.”¹⁷⁹ Subjective shifts are notably prevalent in post-show talkbacks, as dialogic material is brought to bear more directly. Despite the proposition that talkbacks may “lack such a deep ‘emotional layer’ of bonding between strangers,” the discussion of a theatrical piece devised through collaboration has beneficial implications in the cultivation of connection and mutual understanding, particularly when the reflexive discourse occurs between the

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁷⁹ Harter, 142; quoted in László, János. “Identity-Related Psychological Processes in Group Narratives.” *Historical Tales and National Identity: An Introduction to Narrative Social Psychology*, (Routledge, 2014), 52.

collaborators of the initial performance.¹⁸⁰ Participation in discursive practices, both within the devising process and post-show, carries with it the potential for growth and transformation by prompting deep reflection on complex sensory and affective dimensions even after the show has ended. Given the associations often made between the devised theatre work and experimental innovation, the former seeks to develop the limitations and the possibilities of the production and the influence that the perceptions of both practitioners' and the audience have on the meaningfulness of the production and its impact on the surrounding environment. In continuing the conversation around the show, the production itself becomes a stage in the therapeutic process rather than the ultimate result itself, thereby perpetuating the ongoing affective working-through that emerges within each constellation of individual stories and perspectives. Collaboration with adolescents during all stages of the theatrical process privileges the experiences of young participants, respecting their agency over their experiences.

In solidifying the agency of young collaborators, devised therapeutic theatre places emphasis on the active formation of an alternative perceptual reality. This aesthetic power, which transforms the real into fiction and the fictitious into the real, is a "vivid reminder that each voice has its own integrity."¹⁸¹ The creative individuality that each collaborator interjects into the devising process makes use of the "dimensions of the self that extend beyond what is needed for everyday survival," often referred to as "expanded consciousness," for the purpose of bringing to light individual perceptions of the world and the means by which they express themselves.¹⁸² Relational exchanges of memory and its multifaceted understandings in the context of a newly

¹⁸⁰ Nessler, Laura. "Staging Truth to Invite Dialogue: Elements of Group Work in Documentary Theatre Talkbacks." *Social Work with Groups* (New York. 1978), vol. 41, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 34–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2016.1258624>, 41.

¹⁸¹ Conquergood, 10.

¹⁸² Mitchell, 226; Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*. Mockingbird Press, 2002, 87.

expanded consciousness facilitates the negotiation of the facets of identity and perception. The integration of these alternative facets into discourses about the self and one's perceptual reality serves as an effective vehicle for the participant's development not only of their sense of agency over their past and present but also over the potential future they may have as they work through distressing and overwhelming affect. Participants' engagement in creative decision-making and experimental problem-solving allows them to exercise agency through creative means that persist through the continued openness of the theatrical processes.

Reckless Reframing:

Reconstructions of Reality through Transversal Temporalities and Trauma-Informed Theatre

In *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Michael Rothberg coins the term “traumatic realism” in his assertion that “the claims of reference live on, but so does the traumatic extremity that disables realist representation as usual.”¹⁸³ According to Rothberg, an experience of affective overwhelm does not dismantle an adolescent’s understanding of their world in its entirety but impedes their capacity to experience the true emotional weight of the event. As such, entrenchment in affective overwhelm throws the individual’s sense of reality into disarray, fracturing what is known and expressed in their world. The tension that arises here between the real and the traumatic, or the perceived and the repressed, limits the productive potential of experiential representation as it renders this expressive gesture an act of “passive mimesis” rather than an active, productive representation of the real.¹⁸⁴ Passive aesthetic expression that is created for the sake of an audience, as E.H. Gombrich proposes, can be “convincing without being objectively realistic.”¹⁸⁵ This distinction between what is convincing and what is real suggests that, despite the inability to understand the weight of the affective overwhelm, artistic exhibitions of such an overwhelming event may influence the witness’ secondhand perception of the encounter, whether or not it is an accurate reflection.

In a move to reconstruct one’s sense of reality, Rothberg, like countless scholars before him, embraces the unstable, albeit critical, position of memory in the construction of normative

¹⁸³ Rothberg, 106.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 103.

¹⁸⁵ Gombrich, E. H. (Ernst Hans), et al. *Art, Perception and Reality*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, 1.

perception. The diverse, often disparate, micro-memories of an event often contradict the macro-memory that is lauded as the “real” meaning of an event. Rothberg’s distinction between “realist” and “anti-realist” sentiments, notably in the attempt to distinguish the particular from universal, advocates for transversal movement across this disciplinary divide by bridging the gap between the distinctive “modalities of representation” through which the traumatic and the everyday are perceived. Establishment of this link “opens up alternative avenues for exploring the intersection of the psychic and the social, the discursive and the material.”¹⁸⁶

The adoption of collaborative, improvisational theatre as a vehicle for the closing of representational gaps fosters the negotiation of authentic expressions that may run contrary to dominant perceptions of reality and the fabrication of new frameworks of understanding through embodiment and co-creation. The National Theatre’s Connections Festival, a UK-based youth theatre festival held in London, employs collaborative elements in workshops wherein students aid in the devising process for scripts centered around key thematic issues that impact lives of adolescents. As the scripts take form, a tension emerges between interpretive frameworks of reality as perceived by the young participants and by the playwright embedded within the process. While the act of pairing “some of the UK’s most exciting writers with the theatre-makers of tomorrow” is intended to celebrate the creativity of young people, it establishes a fine line between maintaining the authenticity of adolescent reality, particular that which concerns moments of affective overwhelm, and presenting a performance that is ready for presentation to an audience. Given that selection for participation in the festival is heavily based on the script that has been submitted, the codification of reality through a scripted text seems to be privileged above the embodied estimations of reality; However, where the therapeutic potential,

¹⁸⁶ Rothberg, 6.

nonetheless, lies in the continued development of the performance prior to the festival itself. This continued process situates the scripted articulations initially presented as a starting point for the creative process rather than the desired result or sole means through which adolescents might take part in the fashioning of a reality that authentically reflects their subjectivity.

Beyond the Boundaries of Reality

In his work on transversality and psychoanalysis, Felix Guattari calls this drive to express and, subsequently, document perceptual reality into question:

The entire current structure implies a constant crossing out of the young subject's individual spontaneity, the emergence of his or her ways of cultural expression and their detours, which are sometimes difficult to understand for adults who have lost their understanding, but are often essential for the harmonious completion of his or her development.¹⁸⁷

By suggesting that the rigidity of linear documented reality devalues the significance of the spontaneity that adolescents often exhibit, Guattari gestures at a significant differentiation between the world as it is perceived by adults, driven by a search for meaning, and the world as it is perceived by children and adolescents, driven by a sense of exploration and creative play. By emphasizing the vital nature of this spontaneous exploration in the development of young individuals, Guattari draws attention to the power of creativity and the potential for man to “become the founder of his own law” rather than merely accepting an unalterable codification of reality that has been thrust upon them. Within the theatrical sphere, the ability to establish one's

¹⁸⁷ Guattari, 95.

own laws of reality is made more plausible as the restrictive boundaries of reality in a theatrical space become more porous.

The presence of a central function, a codifying framework not unlike a script outline, that maintains a reductive subjectivity imposes what Jacques Derrida terms the immutable “universal problematic” upon such discourse.¹⁸⁸ By referring to the presence of a center as a “universal problematic,” Derrida propounds that dominant subjectivities are marred by the “violence” of centering as it restricts the potential for the introduction of new modes of discourse or subjective territories. The rejection of reality as universal knowledge, or objective truth for all, advocates instead for something akin to Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledge,” which suggests a crucial perspectives that might be overlooked by dominant systems of knowledge.¹⁸⁹ By considering knowledge to be situated, Haraway emphasizes the conditional nature of what is known, as perception is shaped by determinate factors of social identity and individuated experience. When faced with the removal of a previously held subjective position predicated on the universal problematic, the individual entrenched in an experience of affective overwhelm scrambles to redefine the “situated knowledge” that influences perceptual reality through their own authentic experiences.

Transcendence of reality’s boundaries, be they individual or communal, interior or exterior, or somewhere in-between, engender a disruption and subsequent challenging of normative perception. Resistance to the framework of reality exposes the individual to the complexity that is often characteristic of the “entire field of humanity as a biological, social, historical, familial, imaginary, ethical, etc. reality.”¹⁹⁰ The emphasis that Guattari places on

¹⁸⁸ Derrida, 88, 84.

¹⁸⁹ Haraway, Donna. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

¹⁹⁰ Guattari, 88.

spontaneous, complex representation acknowledges the tension between the subject's interior, perceived reality and the outer, social reality without eradicating the potential of one to influence the other. Notably, by embracing the inherent multiplicity of a creative third space like the theatre, the adolescent spectator-turned-actor is able to project and subsequently work through an experience of affective overwhelm, that was once repressed, into a given mode of representation that is liberated from its reductive temporal limitations and the creation of conditions for their own productive transversal exploration.

Conventional Constructions of Reality

Discourses of reality always already constitute sites of contention as they are constructed around dominant, institutional frameworks. Such frameworks work to conceal the relative instability of these discourses that remain so central to a general, socially constructed understanding of the world or, rather, the reality that comes to define it. In *Haunting History: for a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*, Ethan Kleinberg determines that the “historian in the present” establishes themselves as curatorial authority over the “ontological properties of the past” as they seek to ascertain the “reality of the past.”¹⁹¹ Kleinberg clarifies that historical documentation is, for the most part, invented by historians who censor the past by erasing unpleasant events which, in turn, necessitates an examination of the inherent absences in narratives that result from the aforementioned censorship. If perspective is truly determined by the past, as Kleinberg suggests, then those who determine what is remembered of the past are able to maintain control over perception as more and more time separates it from the present. Nonetheless, the truth of past continues to force its way into the present, leaving a lasting impact

¹⁹¹ Kleinberg, 3.

on those who are unaware of it and, thus, prompts a need to deconstruct the entirely constructed perception of history; thus, Kleinberg calls for a comprehensive understanding of how the past influences present discourses of reality, a comprehensive understanding that is often exhibited in the process of theatrical devising. While the historian maintains authority over the archival documentation of historical reality, one must acknowledge the sociopolitical influences that shape perceptual frameworks. Authority over what Guattari defines as “social reality” lies in the “establishment of an irrational morality,” justified by a “law of blind repetition,” that continuously reinforces its own dominance.¹⁹² Scaffolding reality around a rigid, repetitious structure limits the potential for alternative recall of the past and its potential implications on the present and future of the individual in the context of the collective.

Exploration of the structurality and authority in relation to discourse-based reality not only gestures at the contrived nature of historical referents but, subsequently, explores the responsibility of preserving dominant discourses of reality. In “Psychological Factors Determining Human Behavior,” Jung intimates that the power of culture seeks to “maintain itself in the face of untamed nature.”¹⁹³ By gesturing at a self-sustaining framework of discourses, Jung presents a contentious duality between institutional powers and the “untamed” perceptual frameworks that contradict authoritarian discourses. Classification of this alternative perceptual reality as “untamed” articulates the heavy reliance on structures that attempt to undermine minority people groups who claim an alternative perception of the past. Postmodern theoretical discourses insinuate an inability for individuals to “penetrate ‘the real’ with [their] imperfect perceptions and constructions” while proposing a natural propensity for the conferral of interpretive meaning. Though I hesitate to concede with the classification of sense-making as

¹⁹² Guattari, 104.

¹⁹³ Jung 2014, 118.

“natural,” there is merit to placing the objective real and perceptual, subjective reality into conversation with one another.

While a reality based in universal knowledge is often recognized as objective and immutable, ‘truth’ and ‘memory’ remain influenced by diverse perception, though unconsciously. From this perspective, any attempt at representing memory and, by extension, truth is bound by a ‘subjective’ label, manifested and perpetuated not by a pre-constructed social framework but by the individual mind. Some, like Hirst and Echterhoff, question the validity of retellings, not to be confused with recalling, that are predicated on subjective memory as such attempts to represent the past are shaped by an individual’s goal for historical reiteration. In *Variations*, a script created by Katie Hims in collaboration with young playwrights in for National Theatre’s Connections Festival, the staging of scenes that “repeat themselves” with slight changes seeks to “establish what the ‘real’ world is” in relation to the divergent perceptual experiences that one may have.¹⁹⁴ The urge to explore differentiated repetition sets the foundation for a play that orients itself towards “different attitudes and routes” as they navigate wishes that “wish our lives were different, particularly when it comes to our families.”¹⁹⁵ The desire for difference influences the repetitive scenes that unfold gesture towards a transformative goal through which collaborators may rehearse alternative relational dynamics and individual responses to their contemporary realities. Nevertheless, focusing on the potential authority of ulterior motives that may arise inadvertently runs the risk of erasing the vulnerability required to unearth hidden, potentially painful truths. Proposing a relationship between reality and the

¹⁹⁴ Hims, Katie. “Variations.” *National Theatre Connections 2019: New Plays for Young People*, Methuen Drama, London, 2019, pp. 244–306, 297.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 305.

psyche illuminates the potential of repetitive psychological phenomena to influence ‘the real’ in a way that renders it alterable.¹⁹⁶



Fig. 7. Connections Festival 2019: Variations and Flesh at the National Theatre, 2019,

<https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2019/06/26/connections-festival-2019-variations-and-flesh-at-the-national-theatre-theatre-review/>.

Productive Engagement in Dramatic Reality

In *Creative Interventions With Traumatized Children*, Cathy Malchiodi negotiates the distinction between the “objective world” and “our subjective reality” by proposing a third space in “the world we experience [that] is between subject and object.”¹⁹⁷ Malchiodi’s *liminal space* bears the potential to serve as a therapeutic space for traumatized adolescents as it empower participants to explore behavioral and affective dimensions defined not by traumatic realism but by a sort of dramatic reality. Rothberg further articulates the possibility inherent in dramatic realism by pushing back against “naive claims of realism” that suggest the “real’s foundational

¹⁹⁶ Caruth, 94.

¹⁹⁷ Malchiodi, 214.

absence from representation.”¹⁹⁸ The staging of dramatic reality resists the urge to situate ‘the real’ as an antithesis of aesthetic expression not merely through the active depiction of a singular influential factor but its capacity to unify the multiplicitous dimensions of alternative planes of reality.

Many scholars turn to Carol Martin’s concept of “theatre of the real” as the ideal means of embodied representation of reality as it foregrounds the exploration of the physical manifestation of what is considered ‘real’ through the lens of its own complexity:

The phrase ‘theatre of the real’ identifies a wide range of practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical. In using the phrase, I aim to note theatre’s participation in today’s addiction to and questioning of the real as it is presented across media and genres.¹⁹⁹

Despite calling upon the complexity of the real as a concept, Martin’s emphasis on theatrical practices that “recycle reality” suggests repetitious scaffolding around which conventional ideas of reality are structured. Similar to Rebecca Schneider’s term ‘liturgy,’ Martin’s conflation between the “reiteration of precedent” and the initial occurrence confuses the conventional with the potential.²⁰⁰ True, theatre’s participation in a deconstructionist approach to the real begins to move away from a singular, structural conception of reality. Yet, the limitation of articulated reality to how it has always already been perceived, regardless of what subjective position from which that perception stems, resists the potential for the creative transformation of the universal conceptions of ‘the real’ that is made possible in theatrical spaces.

¹⁹⁸ Rothberg, 9; Ibid, 104.

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Haughton, 17.

²⁰⁰ Schneider, 90.

Whereas traumatic realism destabilizes one's estimations of what is real and what is not, Marij Bergh and colleagues employ the term dramatic reality in reference to a "fictional reality created by a wide range of verbal and non-verbal dramatic techniques."²⁰¹ The fictionalization of reality, particularly in the theatrical realm, engenders a duality in which one is set apart from quotidian reality *and* able to reflect on it from an external, liminal space. Embracing a dual positionality undercuts the rigid structural framework of reality as it decenters the singular referent instituted by authoritative discourses of reality and, as a result, generates fissures through which one might insert reimagined interpretations of the world around them. Construction of a multidimensional plane in which something can be both real and fictional, objective and subjective, opens up the potential of what-ifs and as ifs through which one may simultaneously negotiate their subjective positionality across cerebral, affective, and behavioral planes. Studies that embrace dramatic reality seek to harness childhood and adolescent imagination through the lens of a story, be it personal or fictional.²⁰²

Shifting Subjective Positionalities

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari inextricably link linguistic narrative to the construction and conservation of past and present reality. Dependence on linguistic infrastructure not only punctuates the contrived quality of historical narratives but situates history as a closed, "symbolic reservoir" from which meaning of the past might be made.²⁰³ To structure reality within a narratological paradigm "imposes a layer

²⁰¹ Berghs, Marij, et al. "Drama Therapy for Children and Adolescents with Psychosocial Problems: A Systemic Review on Effects, Means, Therapeutic Attitude, and Supposed Mechanisms of Change." *Children (Basel)*, vol. 9, no. 9, 2022, pp. 1358-, <https://doi.org/10.3390/children9091358>, 1359.

²⁰² Ibid, 1376 [76,84].

²⁰³ Hirst et al, 440.

of contingent meaning” between perceptual understanding and the objective fact upon which it is codified. When molded into a “comprehensive system of thoughts,” such layers of meaning serve as the structural principles around which conventional, closed archives are constructed.²⁰⁴ Institutional powers that have authority over archival narratives operate under the assumption that the archive is a closed, chronological structure. Association of archival, “historical” (objective) truth with “narrative” (subjective) as a means of “achieving stable psychic change as is illustrated by extensive clinical materials” exposes consciousness to rigid subjective and temporal boundaries that seeks to assert mastery over the past and its representation in the present possible.²⁰⁵

In the creation of a piece of devised theatre, structure and mastery initially seem not only necessary but vital to the process. Reliance on narrative linearity in expressions of inner states evokes a tension between the inflexibility of a subjectivity influenced by the archive and the transformative potential often ascribed to literature. In the creation of *Variations*, Hims began with an isolated, linear scene centered around a singular protagonist, Alice. Despite the collaborative element at the heart of this creative process, the centralization of a single ‘protagonist’ influences the other participants to make Alice “stand out from the crowd and pull focus.”²⁰⁶ Positioning a single actor at the center of the collaborative creation process threatens the authenticity of the collaborative experience by foregrounding a singular perspective. Rachel Turner-King, in her devised theatre work with youth, notes the contradiction in the relationship between her desire to encourage the contribution of youth participants and her “responsibility” to shape and make sense of the piece.²⁰⁷ The resultant tension seeks to “fit” individual voices and

²⁰⁴ Jung 1939, 52.

²⁰⁵ Leuzinger-Bohleber, xxxviii.

²⁰⁶ Hims, 296.

²⁰⁷ Turner-King, 103.

perceptions into the story that the facilitators endeavor to tell rather than allowing these voices to stand on their own.

Christina Parker, in working across multiple generations, echoes this sentiment in her assertion that applied theatre runs the risk of the “further silencing of voices” as it may prove challenging to “honor all participants’ interventions.”²⁰⁸ In this regard, the conclusions reached in the devised piece inadvertently devalues the participant’s original, complex experience. Rather, dependence on a linear narratological composition works to shape and reinforce unyielding “facts” with which an archival assessment of reality is framed. This notion is exemplified through Hims’ process of creation as her initial read-through of the linear first scene of *Variations* came to define the conclusions reached by the participants regarding the world of the play. While the resultant “master list” of facts develops as each scene is devised, every future scene that may emerge out of this process is colored both by the reality that determines the first scene and by the presence of a benevolent playwright who asserts authority over the final product. The impulse of the authoritative “playwright” here is to organize the “reiterative, messy process” of devising theatre.²⁰⁹ However, by giving into this impulse, what should be a potentially therapeutic, transformative process of “meaning-making and unmaking [that] occur on a micro-level each time we interact or share ideas,” as Rachel Turner-King argues, becomes a stringent process that reinforces problematic structures of thought.²¹⁰

References to making and unmaking, although not fully explored in Turner-King’s work, mark an intriguing point of exploration when interrogating devised theatre as a means of therapy.

²⁰⁸ Parker, Christina. “Intergenerational Dialogue: Connecting Youth and Older Adults in Urban Spaces through Community-Based Forum Theatre.” *Applied Theatre Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 37–52, https://doi.org/10.1386/atr.6.1.37_1, 38.

²⁰⁹ Turner-King, 100.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

It is in these moments that the complex exploration of affect and perception is not only possible but exceedingly fruitful as the emotional immediacy of the performative expression reseats the individual in the affective overwhelm of the original event. To bring together linear constructions of archives and the aforementioned story-based dramatic reality evokes the role that Gabrielle Schwab suggests literature plays in the transformation and redefinition of the boundaries of subjectivity and culture.²¹¹ Given literature's capacity to move transversally across the subjective boundary between the conscious and unconscious, the application of a literary foundation to dramatic reality through a theatrical script serves as the basis for theatre's therapeutic potential when one resists the inclination toward sequential, temporal structure. To deconstruct a linear narrative may seem counterintuitive to the process of collaboratively creating a theatrical piece, but the tension that emerges between intuition and exploration initiates the active creation of distance between one's evolving perception of their environment and the restrictive archival narrative that attempts to assert its authority. It is important to note that the manifestation of discordance does not indicate a complete destruction of the content of the narrative, as the events of one's life do not change; Instead, it is the structure of the narrative that has been deconstructed or transformed. This betrayal of linear narrativity in one's perceptual reality severs the temporal connections "among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future."²¹²

Variation embodies the aforementioned betrayal of linear narrativity by engaging in multiplicitous alternative realities. The repetition of the "same ten minutes over and over again," though grounded in a singular temporal moment, explores the different what-ifs that may emerge

²¹¹ Schwab, 7.

²¹² Brison, 41.

out of processes of play.²¹³ Engagement in the creation of alternative realities, the “multiverse” to which it is often referred, decenters that which has previously been substantiated as the “real world” or the “control universe.” Though this is complicated by the necessity placed on what is real, the parallels established within the text initiate contemplation amongst participants, whether audience or performer, regarding perceptions of the past and the potential future. As the protagonist, Alice, explores these alternative realities, she is able to come face to face with various what-ifs in the physical realm, particularly those that pertain to familial and generational experiences of affective overwhelm. By the repetitious stagings of the imagined, Alice is able to retell the story of her mother and sister’s memories in a way that allows her to come to terms with her family’s past in her present. Despite her attempts to reassert the present by trying to recall “real life,” her navigation of embodied alternatives engenders a shift in perception marked by a recapitulation of the phrase “I always thought” throughout the play.²¹⁴



Fig. 8. Connections Festival 2019: Variations and Flesh at the National Theatre, 2019,

<https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2019/06/26/connections-festival-2019-variations-and-flesh-at-the-national-theatre-theatre-review/>.

²¹³ Hims, 244.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 261-2.

Unearthing the unknown, whether intentionally repressed or not, through the continuous repetition of her mother's past and her present deconstructs temporal linearity in a way that facilitates an eruption of understanding. In her text, Hims introduces a mother-daughter relationship predicated not only on a lack of understanding but on a "sort of argument."²¹⁵ Alice's inability to articulate this generational discordance defines her perception of her mother. Yet, Hims' introduction of the character Shelly, who is "*actually Alice in her mother's body*," within the imaginative realm, situates Alice quite literally in her mother's shoes.²¹⁶ The shift in her embodied positionality generates an emergent awareness that she had "no idea at all that my mum's life was like this" and, ultimately, her mother's desire to protect her children from her past childhood trauma.²¹⁷ During her brief performance as her mother, time is not uniform but "is adapted to the event, and is therefore susceptible to numerous variations and creative distortions."²¹⁸ As Alice, in her mother's body, engages with her environment and gains more historical context for her mother's contemporary actions, she becomes more equipped to enact change once restored to her initial temporal moment. Schwab maintains that performance, be it theatrical or quotidian, is inscribed by "what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times."²¹⁹ While not able to change her mother's "really shit childhood," this transversal movement across temporal and subjective boundaries motivates not only an expansion of her perception but her ability to remorsefully express the complex affect at the center of her maternal relationship as well.²²⁰

²¹⁵ Ibid, 276.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 269.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 284.

²¹⁸ Schechner, 1988, 6.

²¹⁹ Schwab, 7.

²²⁰ Hims, 293.

Embodied Dramatic Reality

Hims punctuates the transformative potential of Alice's multiversal exploration with the assertion that "instead of wishing that your life was different from what it is, you have to play the cards you're dealt."²²¹ Such a declaration speaks to the inability to completely expel the memory and affect of traumatic experience and the necessity of the processual working-through and integration of the material into one's perception and embodied behavior. This investigation of alternatives and potential integration are expounded upon by the physical exercise that Hims paired with the script in the creation process. Led by director Justin Audibert, the workshop in which these exercises took place sought to make "everybody active and thinking about stagecraft, space, and movement."²²² The embodiment of the "victim" within these exercises, which positions a single participant in a "duck/kneel/ fall flat" position, and the "survivor," which positions all participants besides one in the victim position, initiates a rehearsal of affective expression that may not be initially accessible to them. Played to an audience of only the other group members, this practice gives rise to alternative subjective positions that may not be available to them outside of the theatrical space.²²³ In a similar manner, dramatic reality, as a projective technique, attempts to harness childhood and adolescent imagination in order to "project inner feelings on dramatic representations" and bridge the gap between social and experiential reality.²²⁴

Embodied manifestation of intangible dimensions lends a level of legitimacy to this alternative conception of reality and its resistance to the normative, socially fabricated reality

²²¹ Ibid, 294.

²²² Ibid, 295.

²²³ Blatner, 165.

²²⁴ Berghs et al, 1376 [84].

that has come to define the world. Individual lived experiences are perceived through the construction of a “bodily schema out of memories and perception.”²²⁵ Thus, bodily representation, similar to that of Audibert and Hims’ workshop, may serve as a conduit for the construction of the perceived ‘real.’ In a move that ties the body to one’s reality, J.L. Austin asserts that “reenactments make fact happen.”²²⁶ By this estimation, the projection of one’s interior thoughts onto an exterior environment, whether or not they adhere to dominant conventions, creates new building blocks with which one can renegotiate what is considered fact or real. Live performance constitutes a repertoire, distinct from the archive, that justifies the validity of dramatic reality and its experiential capacity in order to “achieve psychological growth and change within a therapeutic relationship.”²²⁷ Reciprocity between dramatic reality and therapeutic pursuits infuses the imaginative with the quotidian to foreground the capacity for the negotiation of one’s subjective position across seemingly disparate landscapes.

Susana Pendzik implicates the therapeutic potential of engaging in dramatic reality in her assertion that as long as one is “involved in dramatic reality, we are doing drama therapy.”²²⁸ Pendzik’s rejection of dramatic reality and drama therapy as mutually exclusive gestures at the capacity of theatrical engagement, which in itself constitutes dramatic reality, to aid in the therapeutic process through the manifestation of previously repressed traumatic experiences. Drama therapy, as it is understood here, builds on Jung’s definition of therapy as developing the latent creative possibilities of the subject, while centering around the drive to “aid in remediation, rehabilitation, or personal or social adjustment” through dramatic intervention.²²⁹

²²⁵ Macey, 247; quoted in Jones 76.

²²⁶ Referenced in Pellegrini and Shimakawa, 102.

²²⁷ Berghs et al, 1359.

²²⁸ Pendzik, 271.

²²⁹ Jones, 1996.

Gesturing towards the creative capacity of a subject, the entrance into a flexible framework of reality facilitates the process of working-through affective overwhelm, now made more malleable in the theatrical sphere. As a result, participants are empowered to confront their memories of those experiences without fear of being retraumatized, as they project their feelings and experiences onto another plane of existence that is entirely separate yet intrinsically connected to their own. The situation of dramatic reality as a foundational principle for the development of creative, embodied forms of therapy necessitates the engagement of both body and mind. The creative embodiment, a principle factor in drama therapy, generates a re-experiencing of an unconscious experience in an ambiguous space of transversal play and, consequently, engenders the transmission of the distressing affect which remains within the body and the mind.

This conceptual link between dramatic reality and drama therapy is exemplified in the work of ViBe, a Brooklyn-based performing arts nonprofit that provides opportunities in “theater education, youth leadership, and workforce development to girls, young women, and gender-expansive youth of color ages 13-26 throughout New York City.”²³⁰ While similar to the workshops facilitated by playwright Katie Hims and director Justin Audibert, ViBe moves beyond the script to focus more on the process of creation rather than the product they hope to create. In her analysis of the creative writing process and performances as well as observations and interviews with the participants, Dana Edell found that when provided with the space to “write and perform uncensored stories, girls will often reiterate and reinforce damaging stereotypes.”²³¹ Edell’s finding suggests that when initially prompted to play, adolescents remain bound by the subjective positionality, placed on them by their reality, that is influenced by issues

²³⁰ Description taken from the ViBe Theatre Experience Website (<https://vibetheater.org/about-new>).

²³¹ Edell, 12.

of social and economic injustice and domestic and state violence, among others. It was only in their extended devising process that a deconstruction of rigid conceptions of reality and their orientation in that environment occurred as they explored their lived experiences in a theatrical space.

Agential Deconstruction of the Known

Though this initially seems to complicate the organization's mission to "empower underserved teenage girls by engaging and inspiring them to write and perform personal and truthful collaborative theater pieces, the process of deconstructing rigid, limiting subjectivities is the first step in shaping a participant's perception beyond that which has been forced onto them.²³² It is by deconstructing the old that a therapeutic process of devising might make space for the integration of generative ideas and the redefinition of their own experiences. By prioritizing lived experience over narrative in the negotiation of reality, ViBe makes space for both fictional and nonfiction accounts of the participants' pasts, whether traumatic or otherwise. Through embodied exploration, participants become agents of deconstruction as they dissect what is known and articulate their experiences "with language no researcher [or playwright] could construct for them."²³³ Reenactment of previous lived experience serves to validate what is perceived by the participants to be true while the process seeks to undermine the "experience that she was meant to have" as dictated by outside forces.²³⁴

Nevertheless, this work is complicated by a qualification made in this study that is motivated, in part, by the presumption that performative or narrative retellings are just as

²³² Ibid, 52.

²³³ Ibid, 61.

²³⁴ Ibid, 52.

“potentially traumatic” as they are “cathartic.”²³⁵ In gesturing toward the potential for retraumatization, Edell cautions that in the process of unearthing a traumatic past, participants return to the state of affective overwhelm that they occupied in the initial traumatic encounter without the promise of amelioration. While there is merit in this admonition, the act of remembrance in the context of a community with a shared, or similar, experience generates a safeguard for therapeutic exploration. The community produced in the process of theatrical creation validates the integration of alternative perceptual responses without the limitations of an oppressive framework. As a result, participants are “slightly modified” through the introduction of the experiential memories of the other as a result of being “plunged together” by virtue of their similar lived experiences.²³⁶

Yes, And: Perceptual Improvisation

Modification of participant perception occurs as, in the midst of conversation, individuals adopt dual roles (both speaker and listener) and, therefore, become both actor and audience member simultaneously. If one is to operate under Jung’s assumption that “consciousness is primarily an organ of orientation in a world of outer and inner facts,” then it follows that as individuals are introduced to alternative perceptual realities, they not only come to serve as witness but shift their subject position within a broader landscape.²³⁷ As participants seek to collectively reshape historical reality from their new subjective positions, the dual positionality stimulates recognition of the other and experiential learning through witness and embodiment over disparate remembrances. Pendzik notes the potential for dramatic reality to aid in the

²³⁵ Ibid, 55.

²³⁶ Brookes, 134; quoted in Emunah, xxiii.

²³⁷ Jung, 2014:123.

negotiation of recollection work that scaffolds cognition around social factors by serving as a transversal space between “me/not me, real/imaginary, private/public, virtual/concrete, and many other paradoxes meet.”²³⁸ Deconstruction of such dichotomies encourages the expansion of perception through the integration of disparate perspectives of oneself, of others, and of the socio-political history as produced by the archive.

In the wake of the eruption of experiential memories, the need to codify the perceptions of others in order to integrate them into one’s expanding conception of the world becomes central to the process of modification. Attempts to fill the gaps in one’s remembrance with the narrativized experiences of others aid in the formation of a sensory map that reasserts the memories constructed in collective recall. Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber argues that traumatic experiences, however, are exempt from attempts at transformative codification because the present functions as “the hermeneutic lens through which the past is perceived and structured” and can, therefore, only “operate in a very limited way.”²³⁹ Attempts to codify traumatic memories for integration into a collective remembrance remain limited by inaccessible collaborative negotiation. Traumatic experiences resist the formation of representations that have been completely integrated into a unified perceptual experience across the collective. In response, Orr advocates for the deconstruction of cohesive perceptual experience as a means of making sense of traumatic occurrences:

By cutting up memories into consecutive moments, lifting experiences out of their contexts, it is possible to craft some notion of cause and effect, deducing what we believe

²³⁸ Pendzik, 274.

²³⁹ Leuzinger-Bohleber, 337-8.

to be the logical consequences of an action [...] the process of gaining knowledge by cutting up our reality, by deconstructing nature's integrated mind.²⁴⁰

Dissection of linear, narratological perception removes individual memory and experience from its historical and socio-political context and opens it up to alternative dimensions outside the initial frame of reference. Orr's reference to "cutting up reality" as a means of "gaining knowledge" gestures at the potential for understanding the traumatic affect that has been previously inexperiencable. Given that memory itself lies outside the realm of linear structure, as events are not always remembered in the exact order they occurred, any attempt to enforce a rigid narrative framework onto memory limits productive remembrance.

Resistance to linearity is exemplified in Laura Lomas' play *Chaos*, a play performed by young people as part of the National Theatre's Connection Festival, as form mirrors content in its approach to the chaos that often comes to define adolescent experiences. The disparate vignettes and movements, often staged simultaneously, were woven together to create a chaotic, albeit aesthetic representation of experiences charged with affective overwhelm. Despite the scripts foregrounding of "rules" that outline how the play might be portrayed or interpreted, the process of staging the play prompted a discussion of the question "How can you disrupt them to create a sense of chaos?"²⁴¹ As the Lomas tested her ideas with young actors through workshops, similar to those involved in *Variations*, the process sought to ensure that the completed script encompassed the authentic adolescent vantage point. This dialogue and, ultimately, the play itself acknowledges that a change in the "initial condition of the system that disrupts the order"

²⁴⁰ Orr, 245.

²⁴¹ Leblaque and Dempsey, 531.

exercises performative possibilities that move beyond theatrical conventions as scenes overlap and repeat.²⁴²

The composition of the piece embraces this disruption as it favors of a structure in which scenes are seemingly “separate and unrelated” yet are “all linked together by this one character who we never see in the play.”²⁴³ The physical absence of a haunting unifying figure gives rise to contradictory images of remembered events which prompts both actor and audience to explore the “unreliability (or chaotic) nature of memories by creating dissonance between what is said and what is seen.”²⁴⁴ The “cutting up” of what is known, regarding the almost spectral character, resists the propensity to impose order on one’s life as it is perceived by oneself and others. Such deconstruction advocates for the actor and audience not to rely on the fabrication of meaning or sense but to embrace the idea that “your structures are not my structures, because your body is not the same as my body, because my feelings are not the same as your feelings.”²⁴⁵ The repetition and differentiation of scenes between Part I and Part II of the play give rise to the instinctual exploration of divergent lines of interpretation in one’s otherwise ambiguous lived narrative. In the creation and staging processes, the actors are encouraged to “explore spatial relationships and discover options in the scene.”²⁴⁶ They were not bound by the conventions of the script nor did they disregard it in its entirety; Instead, they used the script as a foundational set of principles which allowed them to move away from the drive to codify and categorize in a linear fashion.

²⁴² Lomas, Laura. “Chaos.” *National Theatre Connections 2019: New Plays for Young People*, Methuen Drama, London, 2019, pp. 479-551, 488; Ibid, 549.

²⁴³ Ilkley Playhouse. “Chaos | National Theatre Connections | Ilkley Playhouse (2019).” *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Feb. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZelqRcibh6U.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 536.

²⁴⁵ Lomas, 522.

²⁴⁶ Leblaque and Dempsey, 536.

Into the Unknown

Lomas notes that while “it is always good to recognize the importance of your instincts,” such as those that seek to organize the chaotic, it is “helpful to consider what is the opposite of your immediate assumptions” in order to explore the what-ifs that may arise.²⁴⁷ In maintaining a sense of ambiguity within its different scenes, the play invites the audience into an almost participatory relationship with the text as they negotiate those what-ifs and their implications without necessarily reaching a complete understanding of what the piece means. The play’s loose, fragmentary structure advocates for the embrace of the “complicated” and “messy” characteristics of reality and, consequently, fosters one’s ability to influence that reality through its unpredictability.²⁴⁸ With the play’s incomplete assertion that “the world doesn’t...,” Lomas opens up the audience and actors to what the world might be and, perhaps more importantly, what they might make of it. In the final scene that sees all previous scenes overlap, neither the audience nor the actor is able to codify or give meaning to what is being shared, in a sense mimicking the inability of adolescents to understand a traumatic occurrence linearly. The scene’s reliance on chaos, on overlapping planes of reality, aids in blurring the line between audience and actor as both experience a similar level of disorientation that resists logic in favor of affective expressivity based on what is felt.

From the dual subject position of both actor and audience, one’s perception becomes more “differentiated and visually aware” as layers of experiential subjectivity are mapped onto one another. In the process of collaboration, the negotiation betwixt and between these layers facilitate the creation of a piece of theatre charged with transformative energy. Phil Jones speaks to the implications of operating in this liberated, meeting space in his articulation of one client’s

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 542.

²⁴⁸ Lomas, 497.

belief that drama therapy “helped [him] to think about other perspectives on situations,” particularly as it offered the opportunity to reframe his perception of and response to a traumatic occurrence.²⁴⁹ The interplay between and transversal movement across layers of subjectivity de-pathologizes traumatic memory by dislocating the event and its associated affect from its central position through embodiment. Projection of these events into the theatrical space serves to promote dramatic dialogue through which one comes to “spontaneously organize images as a function of ongoing perception and past memories” as art itself moves beyond the boundaries of common perception.²⁵⁰ Cross-perspectival integration, through the sharing of memory, aids in the reevaluation of the meaning of society beyond that which is established by normative, though I use this term lightly, points of view.

No longer bound by a Derridean “culture of reference,” the individual actor enters into a state of becomings-transversal-agent with the capacity to reshape their subjectivity through improvisation and supplementary exploration.²⁵¹ The transversal agent’s embodiment of improvisatory movement sanctions spontaneous affective expressivity that reflects the inner conflicts of the participants in a way that ignites conversations across differentiated subjective positionalities and unearths alternative understandings of one’s lived experiences. Act Out Justice, an organization that provides youth with an opportunity for discussion and transformation through the techniques of Theatre for Social Change, builds upon the personal stories that emerge out of the practice of free writing in order to “weave together a tapestry of the

²⁴⁹ Jones, 8.

²⁵⁰ Damasio, 2010.

²⁵¹ Derrida, 83.

similarities and differences” amongst the lived experiences of participants in order to foster an alternative discourse influenced by “imaginal realism.”²⁵²

Shawn McNiff’s “imaginal realism,” proposed in *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*, is introduced as a reality influenced by the shifts across referential boundaries of narrative, myth, and other forms of poetic structures as one works to construct a “direct presentation of the life.”²⁵³ If, as Rothberg articulates, traumatic reality emerges as a response to a demand to document, then imaginal reality emerges out of a demand for the transformation of the original event and the impact it has on one’s perceptual reality. To move beyond the need to document unburdens the product from remaining bound by interpretation of that representation. Akin to Rebecca Schneider’s distinction between the archive and the repertoire, the tension that emerges between documentation for its own sake and documentation for productive reflection suggests a need to express without restrictive codification. Attempts to transform one’s experiential reality beyond what is documentable are augmented by embracing the spontaneity often exhibited by adolescents as a means of initiating the transmutation of negative affect.

Adolescents, themselves agents of fugitivity and change, often stand in active defiance against authoritative structures which, in turn, lends themselves to the alteration of established meanings. Without placing too much reliance on the creation of meaning in this transformation, the emphasis of reflection and renegotiation suggests that in this process of becomings-explorer, a child or adolescent occupies the prime subject position for productive movement across structures that seek to assert dominance over them. In their book, *Devising Performance: A*

²⁵² Horn, Elizabeth Brendel, et al. “Setting the Stage for Youth-Led Devised Theatre for Social Change: Reflective Collaborative Inquiry on ‘Act Out Justice.’” *Teaching Artist Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3–4, 2021, pp. 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15411796.2021.1961085>, 68.

²⁵³ McNiff, 67.

Critical History, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling turn to improvisation as a key factor in the process of defining one's reality, as it is consistently conditioned by "patterns of learned behaviors of the performers - their habitus."²⁵⁴ The institution of an inextricable link between improvisation and adolescent habitus gestures at an active exploration of potential embodied responses to their inconsistent environment and the formation of alternative pathways of meaning. Improvisatory play emerges as a vehicle for this instinctual exploration as it embraces the authentic voice, capable of moving transversally across adult-driven boundaries of reality.

It is important to note, in addressing an approach that relies heavily on improvisatory play, that some believe "imaginary thinking [to] stunted by trauma."²⁵⁵ While there is merit to this assumption, to suggest that the repercussions of traumatic experience are limited to a single response fails to account for the complex affective dimensions evoked when one becomes inundated with sensations of overwhelm. Engagement in improvisatory play acknowledges the means by which children often incorporate imaginary thinking into their attempts to comprehend an occurrence that resists cognizance. In their attempts to codify an experience, children and adolescents often turn to narrative as a scaffolding which to explore alternative pathways of understanding. Evocation of the imagination within a theatrical context constitutes what Adam Blatner describes as an "adventur[e] into the unfamiliar," both frightening and thrilling, in its presentation of a perceptual reality influenced not by dominant adult ideological frameworks but by adolescent innovation.²⁵⁶

In a panel of youth theatre participants at the National Theatre, Paul Brown pushed back against the adult-driven commodification of theatrical performance, noting that "young people

²⁵⁴ Heddon and Milling, 10.

²⁵⁵ Jones, 132.

²⁵⁶ Blatner, 176.

don't give a shit about things that are going on. If they have an idea, they want to do it because it's exciting, so they do it."²⁵⁷ Adolescent resistance to the codifying frameworks of adult society, particularly within a theatrical third space, expands the young participant's agency over past, present, and future ideologies that are improvised and exhibited in the creation process. This spontaneous exploration of one's creative agency liberates the young participants from a singular mode of affective expression influenced by the destructive repetition of their trauma. Improvised narratological expression of one's inner state suggests an expansion not only of one's emotive and sensory perception but, likewise, broadens one's capacity for interpersonal trust as co-creators of reality. To go off script and improvise requires trust and support on and, inevitably, off stage. Staci Block, in her work with the youth theatre troupe "Reflections," expounds upon the importance of building a collaborative community through the act of being "open to hearing each other's offers, bounce ideas off of each other, and integrate them into scenes, giving and taking focus."²⁵⁸ Such an understanding suggests that the process of negotiating reality and the process of creating theatre are inextricably linked. As the community of co-creators share memories or stories, whether fiction or non-fiction, the disparate discourses of the individuals become the components of an emergent, as if perception of reality.

The reliance on collaborative interaction in improvisation situates the practice as one of communication and problem-solving. The University of Michigan conducted a three-year study on the Detroit Creativity Project, a program structured around a framework that combines social and emotional learning and theatre education, in order to understand the broader impact of improvisation on adolescents' understandings of their own subjective positionality. The work,

²⁵⁷ "Young People on Young Theatre," 1991.

²⁵⁸ Block, Staci. "Reflections: a teen issues improv troupe." *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*. iUniverse Inc., 2007, pp. 56-61, 57.

titled “The Improv Project,” places emphasis on the use of improv games and exercises to use creativity as an agent of reflection, facilitating the re-emergence and reactionary rehearsal of emotions and the perceptions they work to shape. The process of reflexivity renders visible the framework around which collaborative work is scaffolded in order to foster participation in the “decision-making procedures” in a way that makes “future thoughts [...] become more realistic.”²⁵⁹ As Beth Hagenlocker, the Development Director of the Detroit Creativity Project, contends, the improvisers can “be anyone or anything in the stories they create.”²⁶⁰ They are not bound by the rigid stratifications placed on them by societal perceptions. Rather, they are able to recognize and experience the emotions of others as they seek to understand and work through their own.



Fig. 9. *Detroit Creativity Project uses improv to teach youth life skills*, 2015,

<https://www.detroitpbs.org/news-media/one-detroit/detroit-creativity-project-teaches-life-skills-with-improv-comedy/>

²⁵⁹ Lehtonen, Anna. “Future Thinking and Learning in Improvisation and a Collaborative Devised Theatre Project within Primary School Students.” *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 45, 2012, pp. 104–13, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.547>, 111; Ibid, 110.

²⁶⁰ Hagenlocker Interview, 2024.

Therapeutic Unpredictability

The therapeutic potential in empathetic witnessing stems from the characteristic unpredictability of improvisation and imagination employed in the process of collaborative creation. Emunah suggests that the “natural suspense and unpredictability in the unfolding of the piece, along with the immediacy of real issues being grappled with in new ways, are all elements of good theatre.”²⁶¹ In the creation of a theatrical piece, whether or not therapy is the intention, there remains propensity for therapeutic unpredictability through embracing adolescent imagination within the rehearsal room. While the response amongst drama therapists to the imagination is to “regulate their fantasies” or to structure them in a way that makes them containable, attempts at regulation limit the productive therapeutic unpredictability and that which might be created out of it.²⁶² The process of working-through serves as a foundation for possibility and change as participants navigate their lived experiences and negotiate their responses to the affective overwhelm felt in the moment. The state of therapeutic unpredictability, of play, enables participants to hold “contradictory claims about reality” in their minds and bodies at once.²⁶³

Attempts to reconcile these claims in an unpredictable space, unencumbered by historical or socio-political referents, broaden the capacity for participants to generate individual understandings of the world within the process of negotiation and narratological creation. Shawn McNiff asserts that the therapeutic potential of art stems from an “infusion of imagination and awareness rather than a specific answer.”²⁶⁴ The lack of emphasis placed on answers here

²⁶¹ Emunah, 260.

²⁶² Malchiodi, 231.

²⁶³ Pendzik, 274.

²⁶⁴ McNiff, 3.

suggests opposition to meaning in favor of centralizing affective exploration and unpredictable possibility. That is not to say that McNiff advocates for a complete disregard of the meaning that comes to define one's perceptual reality. Rather, as participants seek to understand and re-categorize experiential knowledge, the improvisation of alternative lines of thought works to generate an alternative map of cognition as participants come to terms with more or less stable categories of what it means to "trust," to feel "secure," etc., across disparate sensomotoric coordination as they "become connected to one another."²⁶⁵ The codifying connections made across these maps as a performative narrative is created are not constructed with the intention to instruct, just as sharing a reenactment of one's traumatic past is not intended to instruct the audience. They are instead, as Cathy Malchiodi asserts, manufacturing "life itself, at its fullest and truest and highest" as the participants perceive it.²⁶⁶ The desire to improvise, to let oneself invent, an authentic expression of one's traumatic experience supersedes the inclination towards meaning making in favor of continuous play.

Rehearsing Radical Realities

To improvise is to open oneself up to the potential for the spontaneous eruption of a feeling or action that may not be seen as conformity but reforms the subject into an agent of transformative potential. With the complexity of differing responses to a given traumatic occurrence, this improvisatory creative drive does more than "destroy the old morbid attitude" but, according to Jung, might "build up a new attitude that is sound and healthy. This requires a fundamental change of vision."²⁶⁷ The shift of perspective that Jung advocates for does not

²⁶⁵ Leuzinger-Bohleber, 43.

²⁶⁶ Malchiodi, 237.

²⁶⁷ Jung 1921, 138.

remain beholden to traumatic realism, nor does it support the adoption of a socially constructed reality. It advocates for the deconstruction of social reality and a subsequent restitution of the individual's temporal and subjective positionality entirely.

In order to effectively reimagine our perceptual understanding of the past, we must first acknowledge the contrived nature of social reality as a whole. Social representation theory suggests that “groups ‘elaborate’ their history in memory and how this elaboration or representation influences the groups’ collective attitudes and behaviors.”²⁶⁸ The more significant the temporal distance between the present and the represented past, the more susceptible the event is to being altered or misremembered. As these memories serve as a building block for a generalized understanding of social reality, perception of the past becomes as contrived as a theatrical performance. Staging such a contrived history becomes the genesis point for the deconstruction of both the past and present. Kleinberg asserts that “each time a historical event is revised, the very act of revision reveals the instability of historical truth.”²⁶⁹ Any theatrical reenactment of a historical event, or potentially a “non-event,” renders the social perception of it alterable by virtue of its ability to collapse the temporal divide that brings about historical alterations.

My propensity towards the deconstructivist paradigm, particularly when looking at a perceptual reality, is an attempt investigate the fecundity of harnessing the capacity for transversality that adolescents so often exhibit. Manifestation of this potential through theatrical play distances oneself from the structural, social understanding of the past often presented by older generations and leaves ample space for subjunctive exploration. Within this space of the

²⁶⁸ Hirst, William et al. “Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective.” *Trends in cognitive sciences* vol. 22,5 (2018): 438-451. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2018.02.010, 440.

²⁶⁹ Kleinberg, 52.

subjunctive what ifs, the images that have come to define one's perception, i.e., that which is supplied by adults, are able to be amended and, consequently, reinterpreted in the mind of the adolescent. The tension between adult perspectives and adolescent perspectives bore an inadvertent impact on the devising workshops of *Chaos*, as the directors asked participant's to "create a still image of *chaos*" immediately after creating "an image of *order*."²⁷⁰ The juxtaposition between the two, determined by the facilitators of the workshop, establishes a dichotomy through which authority may be asserted over what fits in the performance and what does not. As the directors determined what realm the adolescent participant's would occupy, they were able to assert authority over answers to questions that emerge in the devising process without addressing those individuals who are providing the material.

Simultaneous Theatrical Bricolage

Entrance into the theatrical sphere, a space that embraces both improvisation and creation, shifts one's temporal and subjective positionality while maintaining a sense of security in the structural, often narratological approach to story, be it entirely fictional or based on memory. This is, perhaps, a result of a theatrical production's ability to generate "enough thought waves in the group" of spectators to engender a "questioning the possibility of working-through."²⁷¹ The spontaneous eruption of alternative thought brought about by the witness of or engagement in imaginal reality, particularly one that reflects a traumatic past, has the potential to facilitate the audience's productive reflection on the past. In the midst of this deconstructivist negotiation of what-ifs, latent possibilities or interpretations of reality that may emerge in the

²⁷⁰ Lomas, 531.

²⁷¹ Senroy, Sonali. "The Labyrinth of Depression and the Thread of Support: Using Storytelling with Girls Experiencing Homelessness and also Diagnosed with Depression," *The Use of the Creative Therapies in Treating Depression*. Charles C Thomas Publisher Ltd., 2015, pp., 264.

deconstruction become present through theatrical performance. Active embodiment of the subjunctive engenders the rehearsal of these alternative interpretations of the past and present that “verif[y] their own opinions and ideas in practice” while also accounting for the complexities of a given reality.²⁷² By decentering a single interpretation, the subject takes on the role of a bricoleur, facilitating a sort of Derridean ‘bricolage,’ a process with no totality focused on a center but on improvised potentiality.²⁷³ This does, however, present the question of whether or not the mere witness of a production is enough to shift one’s temporal and subjective positionality. When an adolescent whose perception of the past is influenced by affective overwhelm is situated in the audience, that individual is defined by their passive suspension in the present as they witness a temporally restricted performance of the past. In this position, they remain bound by the destructive repetition of distressing affect despite its outward projection on the stage.

The invitation of the spectator not only into the performance but the very processes of its creation, however, liberates the individual from the passive present and thrusts them into an active past in which traumatic reality may be reworked for the purpose of ameliorating the negative effects affective overwhelm. In shifting the position of the subject from passive spectator to active agent, the theatrical space becomes a “laboratory where people can explore and experience possible worlds,” including what Richard Schechner terms nonevents – i.e., subjunctive, virtual, fictional events.”²⁷⁴ The integration of these “non-events” gestures at a sort of homogenization of multiplicitous alternative actions or perspectives that may, in some way,

²⁷² Galisova, Lenka, and Dominika Sendorova. “Forum Theatre as a Means of Risk Youth Resocialization.” *Ad Alta-Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2019, pp. 42–46, 45.

²⁷³ My understanding of the term bricolage is pulled from Derrida’s term which he associates with “the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur.” Derrida, 84.

²⁷⁴ Pendzik, 274.

aid in the reshaping of an individual's perceptual reality. Transversal movement across the boundary between event and non-event, reality and imaginal reality, provides space for what has been, what is, and what can be by removing the limitations of linear temporality. By collapsing the divide between past and present, the individual is able to "simultaneously act and watch themselves in action," a feat which, as Emunah articulated, is "difficult to accomplish on a regular basis in real life."²⁷⁵ The occupation of a dual subjective position blurs the line between the real and the subjunctive.

Similar to the theoretical principles at the heart of Augusto Boal's "simultaneous dramaturgy," the desire to elicit socio-political change within the theatrical sphere, first and foremost, necessitates a new poetics. This new poetics seeks to succeed at one main objective in particular, an objective that drives both Boal's written and practical work: "to change the people — 'spectators,' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon — into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action."²⁷⁶ His work seeks to transform not only theatrical space but the spectators themselves, who Boal argues are inherently less than a man, that inhabits the space as well. It is this anticipation of an envisioned future that necessitates a prescription of both a reflection on the past (as spectator) and action toward an as-if moment (as creator) by drawing on experiences of the past. To accomplish this dual subjective positionality, Boal engages in forum theatre due to its ability to grant participants the opportunity to "try their own actions in situations in which they had actually previously been in," i.e., their own experiential reality.²⁷⁷

Exploring Expressive Forums of Play

²⁷⁵ Emunah, 11.

²⁷⁶ Boal 1974, 122.

²⁷⁷ Galisova and Sondorova, 45.

Critical reflection on instances of oppression or affective overwhelm through theatrical representation sets the foundation for the rehearsal of potential interventions or solutions without the fear of ramifications. There is some structure ascribed to forum theatre as an initial scene is performed; however, as the forum opens, scenes are semi-improvised, remaining open to the interjection of new lines and proposed solutions as the witnesses interject and shape the outcome.²⁷⁸ The original scene becomes material on which one might “project their inner preoccupations, in order to use it as a means of self-exploration” rather than a restrictive boundary within which the participant must work.²⁷⁹ As each individual suggests a solution from their subjective position, they negotiate potential realities predicated on choices and behavior that have been rehearsed as part of the forum. While some, like Christina Parker, may argue that forum theatre plays a part in the “silencing of voices,” the technique’s emphasis on participation and collaboration proves far more productive than limiting.²⁸⁰ Inviting other participants to propose potential solutions to a given problem, chaotic as it may be introduces the originator of the event to alternative subjectivities that may overwhelm the individual but dislodge the individual from their traumatized subjective position through open-ended theatrical gesture.

In her book, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*, Jill Dolan approaches the notion of the open-ended theatrical gesture predominantly within an affective framework:

The affective and ideological ‘doings’ we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in a wider public and political realm... cousins to the ideas of [Boal] as well as to Brecht, in that they

²⁷⁸Ibid, 44.

²⁷⁹Jones, 153.

²⁸⁰ Parker, 50.

provoke affective rehearsal for revolution.

The engagement of bodies gestures towards an alternative reality while simultaneously confronting the lived present. This simultaneous temporal experience resists the boundaries of the subject's own reductive temporal limitations and conceives the conditions for future transversal exploration. Building on Boal's foundational principles, Dolan notes the potential of this exploration to construct a utopia through theatrical. Such an emphasis understands the necessity of affect-driven, embodied action to the transformation of perceptual reality and intervention in the social problems that they face. To acknowledge the interconnected nature between body and mind, as Dolan does, one must also recognize that the affective overwhelm that so often skew the perception of an individual bears equal impact on the individual's ability to perform embodied, theatrical gestures for the sake of social intervention. By employing collaborative creation, like forum theatre, in the therapeutic process, individuals can discover their ability to engage in critical dialogue in a way that works to reshape their perception of reality without the consequences of being held to any one subjective position.

The experience of being present in the theatrical space is inextricably linked to "the affective experience [and] the cognitive."²⁸¹ The experience of "lived emotions" plays a significant role in an adolescent's development as it allows them to "learn about the world by pretending" and are, consequently, able to "develop their own emotional regulation."²⁸² Through performative emotional regulation, individuals are able to begin the metacognitive process of reflecting on and working-through the affective overwhelm that so often resists interpretation. It is in this movement towards individualized affective understanding that trauma survivors might rehearse distressing affect in a space removed from the initial moment of impact. SL

²⁸¹ Elliott and Dingwall, 70.

²⁸² Ibid.

Meyers gestures at this rehearsal of affect through the evocation of tears, as they “often connote affective excess; they literally seep through the seams of the body and metaphorically bridge the traditionally public and private spheres.”²⁸³ Though tears are not always shed, they stand as a representation of the transversal movement across the boundary between private and public. Accordingly, the rehearsal of traumatic affect, regardless of its physical manifestation, serves as a means of therapeutic intervention through a sort of emotional untangling that bears real-world implications.

This concept is exemplified in the workshops and performances of the National Theatre’s Speak Up program. Through the program’s work with adolescents, students are able to negotiate and express their emotions through performance in a way that calls into question the social problems that they have faced. One student noted the power of emotional expression in addressing social problems, asserting that “the only way we act to change things is to be able to express emotions, even the negative ones.”²⁸⁴ The expression of emotion, be it positive or negative, allows participants to lay bare their perception of the world in a physical way that cannot be easily ignored. At an event in Havering, UK, Speak Up participants took to the stage to express the fear they often feel in their environment to an audience of parents and other members of their community. These students staged scenarios in which they felt unsafe, each punctuated with the command to “do your job, keep us safe!” In a move that embraces the affective elements that Dolan applies to utopian “doings,” participants play on the emotions of their audience members in hopes of future interventions in safety.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Myers, 161.

²⁸⁴ National Theatre’s *Speak Up*, 2024.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 2024; Dolan, 6.



Fig. 10. *Havering Speak Up Celebration*, 2024, nationaltheatre.org.uk

The emphasis on co-creation, which is cited as the heart of the Speak Up project, proved to be beneficial for the young participants as they worked to reimagine the world and their place in it. Influenced by a shared experience of fear or trauma, the performance created by these students facilitates productive discussions that bring together similar scenarios without erasing distinctive perspectives. Through “social imagination,” participants are able to collectively imagine an alternative reality and, consequently, present this alternative to an audience of people who they perceive to have the most social capital.²⁸⁶ The creation of a shared reality, from a sociological standpoint, bears the potential to “satisfy two core human motives—epistemic and relational.”²⁸⁷ Negotiation of the epistemic and the relation is fundamental to the rehearsal and subsequent reconstruction of reality, both individual and social. Performance becomes a vehicle through which one can explore new forms of social relationships through the deconstruction of social structures and the fashioning of a “truly participatory democracy” through emotional

²⁸⁶ Greene 1995; quoted in Elliot and Dingwall, 75.

²⁸⁷ Hirst, William and Gerald Echterhoff. “Remembering in Conversations: The Social Sharing and Reshaping of Memories.” *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2012, pp. 55–79, doi:10.1146/annurev-psych-120710-100340, 71.

connection.²⁸⁸ Speak Up's performances expand this negotiation beyond the boundaries of the theatrical production by not only inviting the audience in as co-creators but also issuing a challenge for the audience to intervene not merely in the theatrical production but in the real.

Acting Out, Working-Through

Emphasis on collaboration in this performative social intervention begs the question, however, of whether an approach that works for broader social change can, in the same move, bring about independent intervention in traumatized individuals. Though both have been suggested here, I hesitate to conflate the collective with the individual as there is a potential loss in the approach. Nonetheless, I will acknowledge that the versatility inherent in performance intimates a connection between the two. It is important to note that one's ability to intervene in both social and perceptual realities is often substantiated through the structural framework of traumatic realism. The ability of affective overwhelm to disable realist representation aligns with Brison's estimation that in the wake of trauma, one's "basic cognitive and emotional capacities are gone, or radically altered."²⁸⁹ Qualification aside, Brison's propensity toward total eradication is entirely too absolute as a traumatizing past can never be excised or transformed in its entirety. Thus, the transformation of the adolescent's perception of and response to that past remains potent.

Emunah effectively articulates the capacity of theatrical performance to aid in this potential transformation in *Acting for Real: Drama Therapy Process, Technique, and Performance*:

Clients replay confusing or disturbing interactions, express feelings to significant people

²⁸⁸ Dolan, 90.

²⁸⁹ Brison, 44.

in their lives, confront people with whom they are angry, apologize for mistakes or re-play regretted actions, enact multiple aspects to dilemmas or upcoming decisions, practice for anxiety-producing events, and untangle multiple or conflicting feelings regarding current issues or relationships.²⁹⁰

Rehearsal of a response, as Emunah understands it, is not limited to the exploration of a traumatized subject solely as a victim but evokes the complexity of humanity through the edition of scenarios in which the traumatized subject is, in some way, a perpetrator as well. I am by no means suggesting that Emunah is victim-blaming here. Rather, she acknowledges that responses to distressing affect are equally as complex and as destructive as the initial traumatic encounter itself. When conflicts experienced in adolescence remain unresolved, the individual remains “‘stuck’ with negative feelings, thoughts, and perceptions.”²⁹¹ Therapeutic theatre and its use of play re-establishes this state of stagnation in an attempt to break free from it and rework the state for more productive means. Given that affective stagnation perpetuates the repetition of destructive behaviors, it follows that the liberation and untangling of emotions that Emunah attributes to performative replaying serves as a foundational principle of therapeutic theatre.

These forms of therapeutic theatre embrace a physical pause in performance in order to overcome this stagnation as they “replay the scene, this time experimenting with a different way of responding, rather than the one that actually took place.”²⁹² Scholars often turn to the concept of “Rehearsal for Growth” in order to explain this phenomenon and delineate the therapeutic potential of theatrical play. Through Rehearsal for Growth, participants “learn and engage in improvisational drama, variations of theatre games, in order to expand their role repertoires and

²⁹⁰ Emunah, 11.

²⁹¹ Malchiodi, 183.

²⁹² Emunah, 125.

break free from habitual reaction patterns.”²⁹³ Rehearsal for Growth emerges out of collaborative creation as a result of the emergence of alternative perceptions that enable the positive negotiation of the reality they wish to present on stage. Through their complex discourse, participants work towards a reframing of their situations in a way that deconstructs the rigid binary between “acting out” and “working-through.”²⁹⁴ Transcendental movement across this binary not only reinforces Dolan’s proposed interconnectivity between mind and body but also increases one’s mental and physical capability through embodied action. By embracing transversality, participants are prompted to explore alternative social choices and integrate those rehearsed choices into their trauma response without the consequences of the “real world.” As they explore alternative responses, the perspectives that have come to define their inner worlds begin to shift as the individual attempts to integrate the traumatic experience into their perceptual reality.

Coda: Rehearsing and Reintegrating Realities

The final phase of traditional drama therapy techniques often focuses on the practical application of what has been practiced in the theatrical space in the outside world. Applications of theatrical rehearsal often become reliant on the construction of a story, wherein a beginning, middle, and end structure one’s understanding of the theatrical goings-on. This is particularly the case for young populations as the structure of a story proposes an alternate means of articulation and understanding a world that a child may “not be able to imagine because of beliefs, worldviews, or events in their own lives.”²⁹⁵ Given that fundamental beliefs structure the way

²⁹³ Blatner, 174.

²⁹⁴ Haughton, 10.

²⁹⁵ Malchiodi, 183.

one operates within a space, the stories that a young individual comes to tell often determine their interactions in the real world, whether that story itself is based in the real. It stands to reason, then, that as those fundamental beliefs are undermined, be it through destructive trauma or constructive working-through, the stories that one articulates become equally unreliable and in need of reappraisal.

Janoff-Bulman embraces the necessary reappraisal by suggesting the need for new interpretations that require “creativity in the way one approaches the traumatic material and renders it somehow less threatening.”²⁹⁶ The affective distance often ascribed to theatre and other creative pursuits suggests the employment of an external object on which one projects one’s inner emotional state. Yet, if the most effective way of ameliorating the impact of trauma is working through it, as previously stated, does the expulsion of that trauma as an external object allow the individual to not only process that experience but also to let it inform their ability to voice social concerns and transform social reality? Temporal construal theory, initially developed by Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, embraces the productive potential of affective distance as it suggests that the “more psychologically distant an object is from an individual, the more abstract its representation.”²⁹⁷ Emphasis on the abstract rather than the concrete creates space for the what-if, or rather, the latent possibilities that transform one’s otherwise rigid reality. Thus, adopting this theoretical framework “purifies the past of all shit, preserving a pristine picture of ourselves” in a way that provides reflective closure.²⁹⁸ Nevertheless, this begs the question: Does the proposed desire for closure here inadvertently transform the material’s impact?

²⁹⁶ Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*. Free Press, 1992, 173.

²⁹⁷ Hirst et al., 444.

²⁹⁸ Pellegrini and Shimakawa, 115.

Jung associates closure with the reintegration of what he calls “neurotic dissociation,” advocating for the conscious subjugation of the “autonomous complex under the control of his will.”²⁹⁹ There seems to be a common referent among trauma therapists, like Janoff-Bulman and Jung, to the need for mastery over that which resists comprehensive understanding, i.e. trauma. As previously articulated, I am by no means anti-mastery. However, conflation of mastery with the necessary understanding of the affect felt in the course of a traumatic encounter suggests an end to the process of renegotiation and the consequential impact of an experience of affective overwhelm. To reach the point of mastery, one must move past the space of play and resituate oneself within the rigid structure of a singular meaning around which one’s perceptual reality is framed. True, the assimilation of an inexperienceable experience is necessary; however, the assumption that this assimilation is the destination rather than the journey limits the potential for perception that mirrors the complexity of the reality around us and maintains the capacity for future transformations.

Transformation of the past into usable material for the negotiation of perceptual and social realities equips the individual with the necessary data to create a potential future, particularly when one engages in theatrical collaborative creation. Schneider asserts that “theatre ceases to be ‘just pretend’ when explored as a vehicle for collective reconstitution of the so-called real.”³⁰⁰ Pushing back against theatre’s potential for affective distance, Schneider embraces reflexive creation of the “real” that lies at the heart of theatrical creation that seeks to “actively participate in the world.” To increase the capacity for social and perceptual transformation through theatrical reenactment is to empower individuals to recodify a broader

²⁹⁹ Jung 1921, 132-3.

³⁰⁰ Schneider, 61.

understanding of historical memory and a more comprehensive reality. While this work risks rehearsing a reality that “exceeds real-life capacities,” limiting oneself before realizing this potential gap risks restoring problematic social structures. Having reestablished a social and perceptual reality that was fractured by affective overwhelm, participants embrace the active, embodied involvement in their communities. This newly constructed reality informs alternative, productive behaviors as these adolescent participants redress fractured reality and perceptions of the self.

Braving the Storm:

Self-Negotiation through the Collaborative Creation of Therapeutic Performance

The development of selfhood in adolescence is marked, more often than not, by the introduction of new experiential knowledge that is then integrated into the adolescent's perception of the self. Lacanian theory suggests that the *I*, precipitated in a "primordial form," is objectified in the "dialectic of the other" before "language restored to it, in the universal, its function as subject."³⁰¹ In this primordial form, before the child is subjected to outside ideologies and perceptions, the child seeks to establish a sense of self without the influence of others. Yet, each alternative subjectivity that an adolescent is exposed to begins to transform the child's individual subjectivity and, consequently, their perception of self. The "core self," referred to as a fundamental and authentic sense of self, is often shaped by an integration of the cultural references to which individuals are exposed with key experiences in their lives. Given that the development of identity is considered a core task of adolescence, the negotiation of a sense of self that has been fractured by distressing affect is vital to the amelioration of traumatic symptoms. Yet, to perceive the "core self" as a "solid, compact core" around which a number of small "crumbs" of identity converge suggests that as adolescents try to navigate the world, the very socio-political landscape that chips away at one's sense of self is the same sociopolitical conductor that sculpts one's identity.³⁰²

These sociopolitical, economic, or cultural experiences that are traumatic in nature prompt what Elaine Scarry terms the "dissolution of the self in torture," a complete ruination of

³⁰¹ Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I." *Écrits: A Selection*, 1977, 735.

³⁰² Gheorghe, Cosmin. "The angel who was not: drama therapy and clinical depression" *The Use of the Creative Therapies in Treating Depression*. Charles C Thomas Publisher Ltd., 2015, pp. 214, 218.

self rather than a gradual disassemblage that occurs as a child is shaped by their environment.³⁰³ Though not to conflate Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) with torture, the dissolution of self to which Scarry refers is an accurate articulation of the consequences of affective overwhelm that adolescent's may face, including but not limited to the shattering of a victim's fundamental assumptions about themselves and the world in which they live. At a young age, optimistic estimations of the self and the work around them are vulnerable to interpersonal violence through which distressing affects arise. The aftermath of these dramatic, distressing events necessitates the "recognize, objectify, and examine" the basic conceptions of the world.³⁰⁴ The reflective attempts to manage the effects of affective overwhelm often center on a reconstruction of a previously held perception, be it the assumptive self or a broader understanding of reality. Such a task, Janoff-Bulman argues, requires a "delicate balance between confronting and avoiding trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and images."³⁰⁵ This delicate reappraisal of one's assumptive world and the identity one establishes within it occurs as one venture to process that which has been acquired during the traumatic experience by investigating the past through the lens of the present. As a young person negotiates their place in the world, their physiological and safety needs must be met in order to learn how to operate in the world from a subjective position within that landscape.

When the child's sense of security is betrayed by someone on whom a child is dependent, the mechanisms meant to protect a child become the arbiters of traumatic experience that motivate the child to avoid danger at any cost, often through destructive behavior. Jennifer Freyd argues that, for a child, the "risk of full awareness of this traumatic

³⁰³ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

³⁰⁴ Janoff-Bulman, 18.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 169.

betrayal by a parent or caregiver may be, or may seem to be, a matter of life and death.”³⁰⁶ This betrayal lends itself to an inability to trust one’s perceptions of reality and limits the child’s ability to “integrate mutually incompatible experiences of reality” into their sense of self.³⁰⁷ Betrayal trauma theory suggests that traumatic experiences in which betrayal is a fundamental component are far more painful than those that are most likely to be swiftly repressed, noting the distinct significance of social relationships in the constitution of trauma.³⁰⁸ Interpersonal traumas, including but not limited to adolescent abuse, that involve trusted caregivers are marked by “dehumanizing effects of the atrocities” as they call into question the previously constituted subjectivities that influence the self.

In the course of my research with the National Theatre’s Speak Up program, the notable centralization of safety concerns among youth in Havering, UK, pervades much of the work that I encountered. The presentation of *Safe/Unsafe*, a unification of media and embodied performance, bodies forth the interior affect elicited by students’ “3.15,” the moment they leave the safety of their school but before they return to the safety of home. Occupation of the no man’s land between “place[s] with boundaries that [they are] protected within” and a space where “fear always follows [them], sometimes it takes over” prompts the exploratory investigation of how each space is affectively defined.³⁰⁹ By raising the question of authority over the students’ safety through their devised work, these students implicate the live audience, populated with family and other members of the community, in the completion of the video screening by calling for those in the audience to “do your job. Keep us safe.”³¹⁰ Through the

³⁰⁶ Freyd, Jennifer J. *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Harvard University Press, 1996, 65.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 62.

³⁰⁹ Chapman and Plowden, 01:00-01:03.

³¹⁰ Student participants, Havering Speak Up Celebration, 2024.

staged call to action that condemns those in their community, the students involved in the creation of *Safe/Unsafe* body forth the fracturing betrayal of an assumed posture of safety felt at the hands of their authority figures at their “3.15.”

The fissures generated by this shattering betrayal not only undermine the sense of security that is so essential to the self-actualization of the adolescent but also leave space for the exploration of potential facets of identity that may have been “broke[n] off the solid core.”³¹¹ Jung suggests that the resultant psychic “complexes,” foreign to the core self, interfere with the “intentions of the will and disturb the conscious performance” which produces disruptions of “memory and blockages in the flow of associations.”³¹² This direct correlation between psychic complexes and behavior, both conscious and unconscious, seems to be grounded in a linear estimation of lived experiences, i.e. memory, that works towards a singular associated meaning. In “blocking” these associations, affective overwhelm hinders one’s ability to create that meaning or, in other words, come to define their sense of self. This confrontation of the past bears the capacity to expose the individual to the means by which one inscribes themselves in the present through a deconstructed view of previous lived experiences. Employment of such an approach opens the individual up to “imaginative variations” of associated meaning as one works to define themselves not only in relation to others but in relation to their own subjective positionality.³¹³ As such, the constitution of theatrical techniques as vessels for the negotiation of self allows young participants to embody disparate aspects of their identity through individualized and collective play.

³¹¹ Gheorghe, 218.

³¹² Jung 2014: 121.

³¹³ Ricœur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press, 1992, 141.

To Be or Not to Be: Exploratory Construction of the Self

Experiences of affective overwhelm render the self no longer able to rely solely on the psyche to bind its experience in a singular narrative and, subsequently, to represent itself. Predicated on Lockean theory, the autobiographical narrative one composes as a conception of the self seeks to “make some sense of a life” is a culmination of a “selection of other histories” that extends with the introduction of “new experiences.”³¹⁴ Locke identifies the self with continuous memory, a consciousness that can be “extended backwards to any past Action or Thought,” an indication of the causal development of self over time.³¹⁵ Such an assessment of identity, what Locke deems a “sameness of rational Being,” arguably restricts the individual to the same self, one that its “present one [now] reflects on it,” to an inalterable state of being.³¹⁶ Akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of the being/becomings dichotomy, the conception of being centers of the self as having a “single meaning,” a singular subjective state that is driven by a linguistic structure.³¹⁷ Guattari’s proposal of a “biunivocal correspondence between being and language” in which the “stability of reference is found in being itself” undermine, to a degree, this restrictive subjective state.³¹⁸ The inextricable link established here between being and language alludes to a sense of being that is not solely a linguistic representation but, rather, is the embodied existence of one’s subjective positionality through active, performative remembrance.

³¹⁴ Belting, Hans. *Face and Mask: A Double History*. Princeton University Press, 2017. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv29sfzv4>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2025, 5.

³¹⁵ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; Edited by Roger Woolhouse. London: New York, 1997. Print, 2.27.9.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 2.27.9.

³¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 254.

³¹⁸ Guattari, 72.

Narratological Estimations of Therapeutic Processes

When the self-narrative that drives this mode of being is marred by distressing affect, the manifestation of discordance threatens to fracture the self through the disruption of the linear narrative and, consequently, severs the connections established across remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future. In experiences permeated by this affect, unmediated by one's assumptive frames, the conception of chronological codification and modes of interpretation are abandoned. Scholars attribute this disillusionment of self to a "loss of control over oneself-one's memories, one's desires" that results from the fracturing of narratological structure.³¹⁹ The desire to reestablish control as a means of healing necessitates the integration of "stuck" memories that "clings to obsessions and repeated stories," those that have been repressed due to their traumatic nature, back into the chronological self-narrative where it seemingly belongs.³²⁰ Verbal representations of these repressed, "stuck" memories, as in traditional talk-therapies, seeks to process those experiences that "remain frozen in time," inaccessible to the conscious mind.³²¹ Codification of disparate memories within the framework of an autobiographical narrative places a restorative emphasis on making "some sense of life divided and disrupted by trauma," as is often the initial inclination in therapeutic processes.

While there is merit in a narratological appraisal of the self, the intuition to structure identity around the codifying framework of a fixed being suggests an inalterable and irreparable impact of every event and non-event that occurs in an individual's lifetime, be it positive or negative, on one's sense of self. The necessitation of a "center of self," intended to "coordinate

³¹⁹ Ibid, 45.

³²⁰ McNiff, 59.

³²¹ Richman, Sophia. "Finding One's Voice: Transforming Trauma into Autobiographical Narrative." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, vol. 42, no. 4, Taylor & Francis, 2006, pp. 639–50, doi:10.1080/00107530.2006.10747136, 641-2.

and sort through the stories” in an ordered construction of the self maintains a sense of continuity that lends stability to the “‘essence’ of a personality.”³²² With the constitution of a linguistic center the rigid organization that does not exist naturally in the present-being and, therefore, cannot be definitively interpreted from one single point of view. The unnatural actuality of a central interpretation of being attempts to reconcile two irreconcilable narratives, that of one’s present and that of past, as a generative recapitulation of a determinate, representative personae.

Identity Unmasked

The representation of this essence of personality, what Gombrich terms a “permanent expression,” is organized around the lived yet inarticulatory experiences one faces. The constitution of a fixed expression of the self, despite the lack of a language to describe these “characteristics of a person’s attitudinal framework,” attempts to codify and communicate a self that has been fractured by overwhelming affect through a form of embodied representation, namely the face.³²³ Situation of the face as the “cynosure of all images,” despite its subjugation to time and traumatic experience, maintains the immutability of being in its structure. The modeling of one’s face, of one’s behavior, of one’s being, on the perceptions and expectations of others engenders a sense of identity that has been assigned rather than one that has been created by the individual. Under restrictive conditions, such as traumatic affect or the perceptual framework of others, the domestication of the central representative marker of identity confines the individual to an incapacity to exhibit authentic expression of the self.

Ensnared in an inauthentic being, the concentrated image of selfhood embodies the notion of the self as a role of personal and social identities, which are characteristic of not only

³²² Rubin, 256; Gombrich, 37.

³²³ Ibid.

the face but the mask one might create as well. In *Face and Mask: A Double History*, Hans Belting examines the instinctual distinction between the face as an “image of the self” and the mask as a “counterfeit self.”³²⁴ Though reinforced by cultural norms, the proposed tendency to differentiate between the two modes of representation disregards the interrelation between them and the self they seek to represent. It is far too simplistic to consider the mask, a “crude distinction [of] deviations from the norm,” as the antithesis to the face, which is in itself molded by the codifying framework of social perception.³²⁵ Instead, the mask emerges as an alternative face upon which one can expressly articulate an alternative identity that is not already inscribed by outside forces.

When the internalization of an identity ascribed to an individual and deemed real in its by others is impaired by affective overwhelm, the face becomes stamped with “expressions of anger and fear” rather than a “neutral and happy faces, irrespective of other variables.”³²⁶ The face of the traumatized becomes indeterminable from one’s authentic identity, fostering the emergence of what Emile Durkheim terms *homo duplex*: the self as both role and real, both face and mask. The “double role” proposes a contentious simultaneity between the two seemingly disparate forms, a relational tension that epitomizes a comprehensive experience of the self.³²⁷ On examination of the historical precedent of mask use, the foregrounded production of *prosopic unity* in the equation of mask and face situates the former not as a substitute for the latter but as an extension of the face meant to both conceal and manifest.

³²⁴ Belting, 19.

³²⁵ Gombrich, 13.

³²⁶ Catalan, Ana et al. “Can childhood trauma influence facial emotion recognition independently from a diagnosis of severe mental disorder?.” *Revista de psiquiatria y salud mental* vol. 13,3 (2020): 140.
doi:10.1016/j.rpsm.2018.10.003

³²⁷ Belting, 24.

Initially intended to aid in audience's recognition of faces, the theatrical mask of Greek antiquity sought to make visible that which distance blurred while also imbuing the actor with the power to transform into multiple, complex dramatic identities within a singular performance. In *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*, David A. Napier asserts that the mask appears "in conjunction with categorical change," predominantly "rites of passage and curative ceremonies," across anthropological literature.³²⁸ The inherent association between the mask and experiences of transformation, akin to that of funerary cults, prime the art form to take on that which is lost at the moment the boundaries are crossed, and metamorphosis occurs. Through the conduit of the mask, mimetic action moves beyond mere reproduction to the realm of creation in which one can create a new identity or a new face. The paradoxical quality of the mask, one of stagnation and transformation, concealment and exposition, reveals the manifold intricacies of a singular identity that have been suppressed by traumatic affective overwhelm. Embrace of this paradoxical form of representation renders one capable of foregrounding a "split sense of identity" between one's "negative side versus positive side, outside-self versus inside-self" through "depictions that are metaphorical or concrete."³²⁹ The generation and slipping into of alternate representations of the self through mask-based art, thus, prompts a dual facilitation of introspective reflection on and distancing from a singular identity. Through this exploration, transversal exploration and representation of one's complex interiority is made possible.

The historical precedent of paradoxical transformation through mimesis, deployed in frontal view, situates the mask as a privileged implement with the capacity not only to represent the face, and the role inscribed upon it but to "confron[t] the public directly" with the "story of

³²⁸ Napier, A. David. *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*. University of California Press, 1986, xxiii.

³²⁹ Jones et al., 72.

the character” that run contrary to their initial perception.³³⁰ Though aspects related to the theatre of Greek antiquity have yet to be thoroughly delineated, it is widely accepted amongst scholars that the theatrical mask served to amplify the voice of the actor beneath by altering its acoustic characteristics.³³¹ Notwithstanding the practical implications of vocal amplification, an abstraction of the underlying principle of the mask’s capacity to augment the voice gestures at the therapeutic aptitude of mask work. An intermediary between the interior and exterior self, the mask stands as a transversal entity through which an individual, silenced by overwhelming affect, may voice the truth of their traumatic experience.

To perceive the mask as a silent entity when not in active use, as Hans Belting proposes, reduces the thing itself to the realm of the prop and, consequently, strips the mask of its ability to render audible the “human voice that cries out from the wound” of affective overwhelm that is so often unheard.³³² The mask, as a therapeutic object, evolves into an agent of communication liberated from its linguistic cage, imbuing the artist with the power to convey through non-verbal means. The potential to confront in a way that resists repression remains advantageous to therapeutic pursuits as it galvanizes the mask’s adaptability from traditional culture to a more contemporary use, predominantly in service of “recovering lost parts of the soul and reformulating identity.”³³³ Still, by imbuing the mask with affect and feeling, the mask becomes more than just a passive object; rather, it becomes an active proxy of expressive agency and externalized transversal becomings that may not be exhibited by the face.

³³⁰ Belting, 50.

³³¹ Kontomichos, et al., 2014; Calame, 1986; Wiles 2000.

³³² Caruth, 2.

³³³ Tick, Edward. *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation’s Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. 1st Quest ed., Quest Books, 2005., 110.

The tendency for individuals who experience ACEs to remain “drenched in the imagery and emotion” of those encounters long after the incident occurs necessitates a therapeutic form, unbound by an extensive narrative, that remains within the realm of the affective image. A form of self-expression “not limited to verbal language alone,” the creation of the mask initiates the excavation and concentration of “deep-rooted pain in the self without posing a threat to it.”³³⁴ The blank mask, a veritable tabula rasa, evolves into a site of ambiguity between presence and absence, or between reality and representation, in which the image transforms into a “symbolic face.”³³⁵ The disruption of the empty canvas with extraneous materials engenders the exhumation of traumatic experiences, affective dimensions, and compulsive behaviors that remain buried in the unconscious. These trauma-informed masks, wholly shaped by the subjects, render visible the psychological wound that arrests the adolescent in a traumatic temporality, leaving them trapped in “a limbo where past and present intermingle without differentiation or continuity.”³³⁶ By this estimation, the mask marks a moment of transformative self-expression in which the inexpressible response to a excessive affect become expressible in the present moment.

Entrenched in a therapeutic framework, the “trauma mask” functions as an agent of individuality through which the reconciliation of social mask and authentic face stands as an expression of imaginative renegotiation of the self.³³⁷ In *Art as Medicine: Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*, Shaun McNiff posits that there “must be room for spontaneous creations and

³³⁴ Jones et al., 82; Malchiodi, 108.

³³⁵ Belting, 17.

³³⁶ Tick, 16.

³³⁷ Walker et al., Walker, Melissa S., et al. “Active-Duty Military Service Members’ Visual Representations of PTSD and TBI in Masks.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, vol. 12, no. 1, Taylor & Francis, 2017, pp. 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2016.1267317.1>, 1.

continuous transformations” of the self.³³⁸ Prioritization of imaginative play in creative pursuits, over a search for linguistic meaning, constitutes a confrontation of the traumatic in a productive process, rather than an attempt to expel it outright, as a “prelude to reconstruction” of an adolescent’s identity.³³⁹ Incorporation of this concept in their work with adolescents in the UK, National Theatre’s Speak Up program employ mask-making in their creative work as a means of fostering the participants capacity to “manage overwhelming negative emotions by channeling them into creative expression.”³⁴⁰



Fig. 11. *Speak Up Living Mural*, 2024.

At events in both Leicester and Manchester, adolescent participants fashion masks to depict the aspects of identity, both positive and negative, that often go unacknowledged by adults. A living mural added to year after year, the centerpiece of the Speak Up event in

³³⁸ McNiff, 120.

³³⁹ Ibid, 62.

³⁴⁰ Jones et al., 70-1.

Leicester, integrated masks created by students as fruit bore by a deadened tree. One such mask, marked by vertical and horizontal “demarcations on the mask dividing it” into distinct sections serve as a physical manifestation of the fractured selves on a singular art object.³⁴¹ The constant fashioning of this living mural, a performance in its own right, attempts to reintegrate and reroot fragments of a self, the body and the soul it has been ripped from, that have been split by traumatic affect.

At Speak Up’s Manchester-based event, the liberation of masks from a centralized, stagnant position sought to renegotiate adolescent identities through creativity and embodied movement. Driven by the desire to “speak out loud specifically about identity,” young actors entered into the theatrical space, clothed in black and defined simply by masks of their own creation, instituting a landscape in which they creatively embody their authentic selves. The act of constructing a non-verbal space of play opens up the capacity to piece together the fragments of memories, emotions, and lived experiences that intrinsically influence the narrative representation of the self. Externalization of unspeakable, internal struggles offers participants of the program, and other programs like it, a way to “talk about their unseen wounds and struggles by referring to an object—an integrated visual image in the form of a mask.”³⁴² The contemporary mask, an extension of the body in performance, is transformed into the megaphone of antiquity, projecting the artist’s newly reclaimed identity into the public eye as they internalize the mask created by their own hand.

Self-Revelatory Theatre and the Subjective Self

³⁴¹ Walker et al., 7.

³⁴² Ibid, 9.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth situates the heart of human subjectivity in the relation of trauma with an identity of the self. What she deems an “ethical relation to the real,” authentic perception of trauma’s implications on one’s perception of their identity is simultaneously aware of the disparate “faces of life” and the production of a self under new conditions.³⁴³ The complexities upon which these productions rest situate the “underlying consistencies in a person’s face,” those characteristics that survive across generations irrespective of traumatic experience, in contentious relationality with perceptual recognition that has been inhibited by the mask, be it physical or metaphorical, socially or personally constructed.³⁴⁴ The reconciliation of these two distinct selves, the perceptual self with the authentic self, resists the reduction of one’s identity to “the perspective of the experiencing ‘I’.”³⁴⁵ Nonetheless, it is in the relation of this reconciliation to affective expression that the development of the observational self occurs as the experiencing I not only witnesses but reflects on “where [the self] is and where it is not, and imagines where it could go.”³⁴⁶

Contemplative engagement with what is and what could be facilitates the search for a composite subjectivity which prohibits itself from being “enclosed in a whole bent on reconstituting a self, but which spreads itself out over several groups at once.”³⁴⁷ Such resistance to the reconstitution of a whole self, to a singular being, advocates for a process of becomings that continually shapes one’s subjectivity. In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Susan Brison contends that subjectivities are “rendered useless and viewed as worthless” as they are “reduced to mere objects,” a sort of Jungian ‘shadow,’ in the wake of traumatic affect.³⁴⁸ The

³⁴³ Caruth, 95; Belting, 21.

³⁴⁴ Gombrich, 9.

³⁴⁵ McNiff, 2.

³⁴⁶ Boal, 13.

³⁴⁷ Guattari, 7.

³⁴⁸ Brison, 41; Rubin, 257.

instinctual repression of these shadow selves, defined by Jung as the “thing a person has no wish to be,” diminishes the exploratory capacity of a comprehensive interpretation of identity.³⁴⁹ Jung posits that to rid oneself of these shadows in their entirety or, rather, to repress those qualities one does not like subjects the individual to an unrecognizable self that is “more and more non-existent.”³⁵⁰ The propensity toward complete discharge disregards the part of the self that has been impacted by entrenchment in overwhelming affective dimensions.

Expulsion of “raw, nebulous energy,” akin to but not entirely synonymous with “cathartic insight,” attempts to excise the traumatized self by transforming the intangible and illusive into the tangible that can be ignored and, consequently, made benign.³⁵¹ This is not to disregard the notion of catharsis in its entirety; rather, catharsis advocates for traumatized individuals to “direct their discharge along the path of conscious activity,” thereby prompting the reduction of subjectivity to “mere objects.”³⁵² This inclination to objectify pain, a precursor to the imbucation of meaning, necessitates a distortion of the experience in a way that betrays the authentic interpretation and consequential representation of the encounter. Jung posits that this urge to adapt the self to one’s lived experiences comes at the cost of “aesthetic values whose loss to a man’s character is a matter for regret.”³⁵³ This estimation of such an aesthetic betrayal catalyzes the disappearance of the objectified, subjective “face” that is “lost forever at the threshold of death.”³⁵⁴ Attempts to reintegrate these “faces” that have been prematurely excised from one’s comprehensive self, as Augusto Boal suggests, lead the distinctive aspects of oneself to coincide with other contradictory roles that one may take on. Subjecting these seemingly irreconcilable

³⁴⁹ Jung.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Freud, 147.

³⁵³ Jung, 135.

³⁵⁴ Belting, 9.

selves within a singular codifying framework, however, prioritizes the “inner director” over less desirable, but no less influential, elements of identity.

Operating under Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that “in a becoming, one is deterritorialized,” the estrangement from this objectified, centralized being, exposes the self to a productive negotiation of complex subjectivities in which one is able to embody the “dynamic nexus of a number of roles” that are emblematic of “different and often conflicting parts of the self.”³⁵⁵ As the “inner director” seeks to reorganize these distinctive roles with these seemingly disparate roles, one becomes a sort of “playwright, creating a story,” and works to “shape experiences so that they can be presented with a higher degree of aesthetic coherence and effect.”³⁵⁶ To establish the subjective mind as director and playwright ascribes one with agency over their own understanding and representation of the events and the individual that experiences them. Predisposed to these pseudo-theatrical roles, entrance into the theatrical space fosters awareness of one’s present experience while simultaneously evoking an introspective narrative history.

Sheila Rubin’s Life Story process of self-revelatory theatre alludes to the therapeutic benefits of “verbally articulating what emerges from the body during improvisational processes” as well as the physical embodiment of that which emerges from the mind.³⁵⁷ The inextricable link posed in Rubin’s work moves beyond narratological estimations of therapeutic processes by centering physical presence rather than adhering to the inclination of “dilute [oneself] with narrative.”³⁵⁸ The act of foregrounding one’s approach to self-revelatory theatre with an acknowledgment of presence and narrative seeks to ground such exploration in the real by

³⁵⁵ Rubin, 256; Deleuze and Guattari, 291.

³⁵⁶ Rubin, 250.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 253.

³⁵⁸ Ibid, 256.

relying on one's lived experiences rather than the narrative one creates to understand those experiences. Reliance on the real within a space of creativity seeks to shape one's perception of the self in the real world with that which has been rehearsed in the exploratory, theatrical space. However, Rubin's claim that the resultant amalgamation of these real yet seemingly insignificant events, through both body and word, fabricates "a thread that provides significant insight and meaning," limits the capacity for play that is vital to therapeutic, deterritorialized becomings.³⁵⁹

While this estimation moves beyond the Jungian subjugation of the self to a linear narrative, her reliance on the creation of meaning out of the story one creates arguably reasserts the rigid codification that limits any conceivable becomings. I do not seek to entirely negate the therapeutic promise of self-revelatory but, rather, advocate for the further harnessing of the fissures, fresh insertion points, created when one fractures the linearity of lived experience and decenters the narrativized self. The decentering of a centralized self that occurs as a result engenders a process of creative growth and processual self-discovery that moves beyond the role that traumatic experience forces upon the individual and facilitates the exploration of a comprehensive interpretation of identity by performing disparate roles that are distinctive yet no less a part of the self.

Cultural Codifications of Self

Observation of the self as that which is "objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other," as Lacan does, constitutes a perception of the self in relation to and, consequently, structured by others through the prejudgment of labeling or codification, particularly when that label comes from a friend or family member. The act of ascribing labels to young people, in

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 251.

particular, asserts an identity upon them that seeks to define their future actions and interactions as they navigate their self-perception. Such social labels cultivate the conditions for the adolescent's behavior through the perpetuation of structural, perceptual boundaries. As individuals interact relationally, the restrictive experiential knowledge maintained by one's sphere of influence serves as the codifying framework through which meaning is forced upon one's estimation of the self. The socially contrived subjective positionality gestures at Lacan's notion of transition within a given generation from "solitary to the gregarious form 'I'" obtained through relationality.³⁶⁰ The fusion of perceptual subjectivity, grounded in recognition with the other, works to stabilize an adolescent's burgeoning identity. Yet, when that fusion is impaired by a traumatic betrayal, that which once nurtured a sense of self becomes that which incites its destruction.

Affective Dimension of Familial Distress

Identities are shaped, in no small part, by the communities of which they are permanent members. These communities inevitably play a significant role in their lives, none more prevalent in the lives of adolescents than the family. Thus, born into a generational framework of subjectivity, the seeds of one's perspective and identity are cultivated within and, consequently, altered by the familial unconscious. This unconscious, founded on creeds and dogmas of its past, establishes a "genetic structure from [one's] ancestors which determines the possibilities of [their] life and fate" as it works to shape individual choices.³⁶¹ To suggest that the patterns of possible generational futures centralized in familial unconscious drive the crucial decisions made

³⁶⁰ Lacan 1977, 735.

³⁶¹ Kiss, Enikő Csilla. "Personality and the familial unconscious in Szondi's fate-analysis." *Empirical Text and Culture Research*, 2010, vol. 4, 71.

throughout one's life restricts the potential for self-determination that moves beyond inherited subjectivities. Hereditary disposition, which Jung associates with a psychological superstructure, serves as a determining factor for the means by which one interacts with others who are not relationally linked. The psychic contagion of affect, be it repressed or acknowledged, across generations imposes complex rules of being or knowing on the young individual that perseveres across temporal boundaries.

Company3, a youth theatre company based in North London, used the theatrical space to unpack and call into question these rules by drawing on the autobiographical experiences of adolescents between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. Born out of collaboration, the play was formed by uniting "scientific content (information about the brain)" with "personal content (stories and experiences of the cast, which make sense of the science)" to insure that the play remains centered on the voices of its participants while acknowledging the difference between parents and their children.³⁶² The fear that emerges when the child is unable or unwilling to adhere to those rules of being and knowing, set by the parent, because "who I am might not be who you want me to be/Or who you are" contributes to the tension that often arises between disparate generations.³⁶³ By positioning themselves as "strangers" who "don't talk to each other," the collaborators of the play emphasize the dialogical disconnect that occurs not because their parents don't listen but because they resist a complete understanding of their child.

Familial "prohibitions against knowing," the repression of a familial past, contribute to the destabilization of the identity that the family is meant to stabilize.³⁶⁴ The degree of closeness

³⁶² Glasier, Ned, et al. *Brainstorm: The Original Playscript and a Blueprint for Creating Your Own Production*. Nick Hern Books, 2016, 66.

³⁶³ Ibid, 57.

³⁶⁴ Charles, Marilyn. "Trauma, Fragmentation, Memory, and Identity." *Fragments of Trauma and the Social Production of Suffering: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, pp. 25-44, 33.

between the individual and their family, the safety or neglect felt, is crucial in the development of a young individual's conception of selves as the "human brain during the early years of life is dependent upon both genetic information and proper external stimulation."³⁶⁵ As an agent of regulation for the way one relationality with both self and other, the stimuli or "cells of our social life," seep into the mind and, by osmosis, serve to organize the mind around the perception of others rather than one's personal interpretation.³⁶⁶ Particularly when that which is meant to anchor one's identity becomes entangled, faced with familial betrayal, the absence of a stable subjective terrain warrants a negotiation of an unsettled foundation marred by traumatic fissures. Bound by the affectively charged "presumption of the essential meaning" determined by one's family, an adolescent's ability to recognize an authentic affective experience as they perceive it and its impact becomes markedly impeded.³⁶⁷

Adolescent perceptual meaning that, by virtue of its subjugated position, cannot be "validated by within the family system as it stands" but, nonetheless, consciously emerges through enacted, indeterminate behaviors as the individual seeks to navigate the complex layers of meaning that are embedded in a symptom.³⁶⁸ The internalization of determinations made by one's authority figures constitutes a duality within the individual as they seek to both accommodate familial demands and, conversely, substantiate an individual sense of autonomy. Though generational communities of memory reflect individual experience to some degree, preconceived narratives of familial reality limit temporal horizons through the repression of the next generation's voice. This contentious duality gives rise to a "disorganized attachment" with one's family and the sense of self it works to shape. Such attachment is markedly attributed to

³⁶⁵ Malchiodi, 45.

³⁶⁶ Boal, 41.

³⁶⁷ Charles, 29.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 28.

the deconstruction of a “generally organized and consistent strategy of affective regulation” as a relational framework that once served to codify perceptual experience is rendered ineffectual.³⁶⁹ As individuals seek to regulate the residual affect across generational boundaries, the temporal past is brought into the “sticky substance of the present,” adhering to a seemingly fixed identity as one negotiates their subjective positionality within a family constellation.³⁷⁰

Participants of family constellation work actively negotiate family constellation, defined by the American Psychological Association as “a total set of relationships within a particular family,” as a means of combatting the emotional dysregulation that may arise as one faces adverse childhood experiences.³⁷¹ Scholars often associate this affective dysregulation with a “self-representation marked by pessimistic thoughts about the outcomes of their actions.”³⁷² The labeling of these negative expressions of behavior as reductive “conditions” runs the risk of coming to “define their future interactions, the consideration of their own identity and how others see them” based on past events as experienced by other family members.³⁷³ This is made evident in the assertion made by “parents” in *Brainstorm* that “one day your brain will be just like mine/ And then you’ll be okay” as the notion of okayness is inextricably intertwined with the adult perception.³⁷⁴ It is only in the integration of an adolescent’s authentic past experience, particularly experiences of familial trauma, into the broader generational narrative that the unconscious dynamics that codify individual behavior might be deconstructed in favor of complete acceptance of the adolescents individuation.

³⁶⁹ Charles, 27.

³⁷⁰ Schneider, 144.

³⁷¹ “APA Dictionary of Psychology,” 2025.

³⁷² Cristofanelli, S., Testa, S., Centonze, E., Baccini, G., Toniolo, F., Vavalle, V., & Ferro, L. (2024). Exploring emotion dysregulation in adolescence and its association with social immaturity, self-representation, and thought process problems. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1320520>, 8.

³⁷³ Elliott and Dingwall, 68.

³⁷⁴ Glasier, 56.

To position such a codifying framework within the imaginal realm of therapeutic drama facilitates the expressive exploration of contemporaneous familial interactions with unrelated participants as it seeks to reflect past experiences, particularly those of a traumatic nature, and rehearse responses without fear of shattering one's relationships further. While effective negotiations of the familial constellation are often ascribed to traditional family therapy, play-based family constellation therapy, a technique in which adolescents act out familial dynamics with a cast of other unrelated participants in the roles of various family members, allows the participant to communicate directly with their relatives within the constellation or to watch interactions unfold as a distanced witness. First developed by German therapist Bert Hellinger in the 1970s, family constellation therapy centers on the exploration of unconscious affective entanglements within complex, potentially traumatic experiences to foster cognizance of relational dynamics within the familial framework. In her work with children, Malchiodi adopts aspects of this therapeutic technique as she works with the "narratives that are present in the relationship of the child and the caregivers" as they test transformations of familial dynamics in addition to "what they need to keep as their history develops together."³⁷⁵

The situation of authority over the representation of these dynamics in the hands of children and adolescents facilitates the reimagination of how they relate to others within the broader framework through re-immersion in past intuitive, somatic experiences. This is not to say that such a reimagination disregards the psychological presence of the family in its entirety, as such an influence is always already present; Rather, the opportunity to witness unseen or unacknowledged dynamics within the realm of fiction prompts the rehearsal of more conscious responses or resolutions to various encounters. Muriel Gold harnesses this opportunity for

³⁷⁵ Malchiodi, 216.

therapeutic rehearsal in her employment of what she terms “The Fictional Family,” a technique that relies on a student’s ability to create and inhabit a “fictional character” in order to “experience situations and a family life different than their own.”³⁷⁶ Through the identification with a fictional character, albeit one that is grounded in the participant’s reality, and its position in the fictional family, participants are able to explore the intersection between their attitudes and perceptions and the role that they occupy.

As an extension of the social, the fictional family brings the individuality of role theory into direct conversation with the social realm, attempting to foster empathy with other family members with positions both similar and dissimilar to one’s own. Given that the family constitutes a child’s perception of the social, as it is the first space in which they encounter the other, it acts as the foundation upon which the development of a child’s personality and social self is built. Therefore, in the act of creating a “family portrait,” as is often the first step in this therapeutic technique, the child might cast themselves and other members of the group into representative sculptures that embody the abstract relationships of one’s family as the adolescent individual perceives them. In this pseudo-theatrical space, these embodied portraits become malleable enough for the rehearsal of distinctive ways of being, especially when traumatic, adverse childhood experiences affect an adolescent’s sense of self and, consequently, the way they operate within a broader society.

Theatrical Processes of Creating Community of Belonging

³⁷⁶ Gold, Muriel. “The fictional family in the drama class and across the curriculum.” *Interactive and improvisational drama: varieties of applied theatre and performance*, edited by Adam Blatner and Daniel J. Wiener. Universe Inc., 2007, 119.

More than the act of creating a “familial portrait” in the wake of experiences of affective overwhelm, the alternative communal sphere generated in theatrical play facilitates the negotiation of alternative belongings in the wake of one’s disengagement from predominant social frameworks. In response to the “poor prerequisites to adapt to the demands of society,” often a result of familial upbringing, the formation of an alternative social framework, one grounded in explorative creation, stimulates relational dialogue and bridges the expanse between self and others through the reflection of the past and the proposal of an improved future. Participation in the theatrical devising process serves as a surrogate community in which one, in a state of vulnerability, is empowered to share traumatic lived experiences with a trusted group. The constitution of a newfound protective, social framework within the devising space, adolescents are able to “go into their inner world of life experiences” and “imagine and ultimately reconstruct new outcomes, insights and resolutions” which, in turn, influence participants’ perceived identity.³⁷⁷

In Kildare Youth Theatre’s play, *Venetians*, 13 young people, some willing migrants and some refugees, reflect on their experiences of isolation and the impact those experiences have on their sense of self. Despite its collaborative fabrication, the production begins with an isolated individual, the “First Dancer” narrated by a singular disembodied voice, as a means of perpetuating the feeling that these individuals “did it all alone.”³⁷⁸ The dancer embodies the isolation felt when one is removed from their social structures while suggesting, as articulated by the voice, that the “irresistible urge to move is constituted by an evaluative conviction that *A*,

³⁷⁷ St. Thomas, Bruce, and Paul (Paul Gordon) Johnson. *Empowering Children through Art and Expression: Culturally Sensitive Ways of Healing Trauma and Grief*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007, 107.

³⁷⁸ Hussey, Peter. *Venetians*. Kildare Youth Theatre. 2017, 2, 10.

which we know and where we are right now, is inadequate.”³⁷⁹ In presenting body before voice, the work establishes the body as the socially inscribed “ground of the self” upon which one’s sense of self is fashioned. The movement of the body across the boundaries and beyond the limits of one’s understanding of the social self, as Guattari suggests, affords “two possibilities: either the group or the recalcitrant individual, is shattered.”³⁸⁰

The forced migration as adolescents, as exemplified in Erasmus student 2’s and Jerry’s similar refugee experiences, is remembered by the “friends, home, and community that lived there” that these young individuals left behind.³⁸¹ Given the necessity of social engagement in survival, the dissociation from one’s key relational framework lends itself to the fracture of self, bifurcated into one “apparently normal part that is responsible for day-to-day functioning” and one “emotional part that experiences the emotional memory of the traumatic experience.”³⁸² This dual sense of belonging is reflected in Jerry’s “internal crisis” surrounding his “strange sense of identity growing up.”³⁸³ With his inability to reconcile distinctive identities, one grounded in a country where “corruption is soaked into the fabric” and one grounded in a country where “there’s too much stacked against you,” Jerry becomes a contested sight in himself, not only between his Irish and Nigerian culture but between the “normal” part of himself and the “emotional,” traumatized part of himself.³⁸⁴ Similarly, Erasmus Student 2’s forcible removal from his home country in the wake of the Libyan Revolution necessitates a transformation of the self through language as he comes to the realization that “moving to Ireland with no English

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 2.

³⁸⁰ Guattari, 79.

³⁸¹ Hussey, 34.

³⁸² Social self-preservation theory recognizes that social groups are necessary for survival; it does not explicitly discuss the role of level of trust or dependency in eliciting shame in the low-status individual; Platt, Melissa G., and Jennifer J. Freyd. “Betray My Trust, Shame on Me: Shame, Dissociation, Fear, and Betrayal Trauma.” *Psychological Trauma*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2015, pp. 398–404, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000022>, 399; Ibid, 398.

³⁸³ Hussey, 33.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

equals no friends.”³⁸⁵ The simultaneous occupation of the stage equips the actors to “weave together various social identities” that contribute to a sense of belonging.³⁸⁶

Despite being otherwise unconnected, these two individuals, along with the other members of the cast, cultivate a community on the basis of shared experiences of isolation. Though not all of the stories that contribute to *Venetians* are inherently traumatic, as some participants migrated willingly, the play nonetheless reflects the “thousands of young people who were leaving” their country of origin, whether out of anger, fear, desperation, or other motivations.³⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the coalescence of analogous stories operates as a restorative practice that aids in the genesis of “positive community building that promotes affirmation” and resilience.³⁸⁸ The process of exchanging anecdotes of isolation transforms young individuals who are “trapped out there, not knowing where to go or what to do” into “a family, sharing food, cigarettes, joints and partners” wherein people “felt the happiest and the safest there than I ever have felt anywhere else in my life.”³⁸⁹ The conversation between multiplicitous experiential perspectives of the past facilitates a culture of intimacy and influence that moves beyond the boundaries of traumatic isolation as individual scenes are integrally linked with other members of the group.

Operation in this alternative social framework allows for the renegotiation of limited, isolated perceptions, memories, and experiences in a way that acknowledges a common history across difference. In the collaborative process of narrative creation, the act of writing down what Mark had been saying like a “sort of a history lesson” informs the community founded on

³⁸⁵ Ibid, 34.

³⁸⁶ Katovich, Michael A., and Robert A. Hintz. “Responding to a Traumatic Event: Restoring Shared Pasts Within a Small Community.” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1997, pp. 275–290. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.1997.20.3.275. Accessed 17 Dec. 2020, 287.

³⁸⁷ Hussey, 27.

³⁸⁸ Harden et al, 67.

³⁸⁹ Hussey, 9.

authentic, shared experiences.³⁹⁰ By this estimation, collaboratively generated performances become designated as a site wherein others may witness and empathize with another's story. The central narrative of *Venetians* does not merely establish itself as a "brief account that 'patches up' the past;" Rather, it retains the authenticity of individual perceptions as they relate to other participants as the individual informs the collective and the collective informs the individual.³⁹¹ Emphasis on cooperation in tandem with individual work facilitates deeper reflection on one's perception of past events as they are integrated into but not overshadowed by the larger meaning that a director or facilitator subjects it to.

While attending the National Theatre's Speak Up event in Havering, the performances presented by the participants demonstrated this principle of dualistic cultural identity as they reflected on their subjective positions across physical and affective boundaries. The performance of *What is Home?* calls into question the notion of belonging as students negotiate the impact of migration on identity, be it cultural or otherwise. The lack of control inherent in the involuntary relocation of adolescents from the "A, being what we know and where we are," and into the space of the unknown, the "B," gives rise to affective overwhelm as one grapples with the development of both immediate and long-term psychiatric symptoms.³⁹² *What is Home?* emphasizes forced border crossing as a mode of becomings, both apart from and integrated with distinctive communities, in which it "is hard to be yourself."³⁹³ The failure to become what one was in a previous environment is tied to a language that is other than one's own in a way that ties body to mind or, conversely, to the demonstrative narrative around one's sense of self. It is when

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 7.

³⁹¹ Katovich and Hintz, 276.

³⁹² Hussey, 2.

³⁹³ Chapman and Plowden, 03:25-03:27.

one's language does not reflect the environment in which they find themselves, oftentimes involuntarily, that the individual feels incomplete in their estimation of the self.

In the liminal space between belonging and isolation, between the physical occupation in a given space and the affective relatedness to a community, the drive to find a microcosm of home, where young individuals can “be [themselves] without having to remember what the right words are” in a space of displacement, becomes synonymous with the becomings of an alternative estimation of the self that reconciles the before-migration self and the after-migration self.³⁹⁴ Through the constitution of a surrogate community founded on principles of theatrical creation, the negotiation of this complex identity prompts a “*changed way of relating to others*” and, in turn, a “*changed sense of self*” as participants enter into theatrical encounters between self and others.

Influence of Created Community on Identity

The “social context of action,” a term borrowed from Michael Katovich and Robert Hintz, is fashioned within the devising collective to regulate and modify participants' behavior in accordance with a shared objective of productively working through traumatic experiences. The therapeutic dimensions of theatrical devising capitalize on the “content of drama activities, the process of creating enactments, and the relationship formed” between participants as a means of externalizing, or more accurately re-externalizing, interior affective overwhelm through the communal sharing of narrativized stories and lived experiences.³⁹⁵ Affective externalization bodies forth the unspoken by providing those “who had lost their voice” with “a way to say it” in

³⁹⁴ Ibid, 02:07-02:16.

³⁹⁵ Jones, 6.

front of an audience that bears witness in a way that renders the participant's lived experiences inescapable.³⁹⁶

In beginning with the assertion that “whenever the microphones are used during the play it indicates that a parent is talking,” *Brainstorm* illustrates the continuous elevation of the parental voice over the adolescent voice. In the section “You Say to Me, I Say to You,” each adolescent collaborator “picks up the microphone and takes it to the center of the stage,” speaking into it as they voice what they so often hear from the authority figures in their lives. The play situates the assumption made by adults about their child, that their child's “brain is broken./It's like an adult's brain, but it doesn't work properly,” in direct conflict with assumptions the child makes about themselves with the “microphone out of the way,” the estimation that their “brain isn't broken./It's beautiful.”³⁹⁷ Audible elevation of the voice of the Other, however, does not advocate for the authority of adult assumptions within these inconsistent perceptions; rather, the vocal elevation foregrounds the affective and psychological impact of these assumptions as they often become the dominant perspective to which adolescents subscribe when molding their sense of self.

Adversely defined subjective formations, such as ‘child’ and ‘adult,’ give rise to an almost theatrical tension evoked between observation and enactment. This tension arises as the repetitious call made to the audience, mainly populated with family and community members, to “Look at us/Look at us/Look at us” asserts the dominance of the adolescent body and voice that demands attentive observation of their lived experiences on stage.³⁹⁸ This insistence to be seen implicates the audience's skewed perspective of adolescents as “crap adults” rather than

³⁹⁶ Emunah 2020: 268.

³⁹⁷ Glasier, 56.

³⁹⁸ Ibid, 19.

developing individuals.³⁹⁹ If we are to operate under Shaun McNiff's postulation that "it is through others that we discover ourselves," the Other who bears witness to the testimony presented on stage "reestablishes the survivor's identity" through the act of acknowledgment from the community that has determined their original subject position.⁴⁰⁰ This reestablished identity, however, still operates and is influenced by the codifying framework of the adolescent's authority figure.

Adolescent self-expression within an alternative community, one unbound by the negative stereotyping attributed to the younger generation, validates the reification of a sense of self determined by the participant's own perception of who they are. The production of self-affirming meaning in a creative collective of other young people, while still formed in relation to others to some degree, facilitates the processual becomings that bridge the gap between participants and their inner selves by acknowledging authentic feelings. Demonstrated by the process-driven projects of *Brainstorm* and *Speak Up*, the utilization of exploratory workshops to develop theatrical content prompts the rehearsal of lived experiences and the "emotions they feel at this difficult and chaotic time" as one negotiates potential modes of becomings.⁴⁰¹ Doyin, a participant in the collaborative creation of *Brainstorm*, argues that "the neurons in my brain get connected up again and again synapses" with each new experience she encounters.⁴⁰² As Doyin and her fellow collaborators witness and perform the embodiment of their past, the connections they "use all the time get stronger and stronger./And the connections you don't use-as you get older they start to die off" in the process of pruning.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁹ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁰⁰ McNiff, 2; Brison, 42.

⁴⁰¹ Glasier.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 28.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 31.

Involvement in supplementary becomings, that which occurs when synapses are connected and disconnected, necessitates the reconciliation of the subjective self, which is “aware of their own body and imitates the behavior of others,” and the reciprocal social self, which “understands that there are differences in their experiences of the world.” Thus, the process of pruning becomes a means by which adolescents resist the solitary identity enforced upon them by society, as adolescents are able to come to terms with their interior selves and express affect that has been previously repressed. Much like Segen’s realization in *Brainstorm* that she “never really dealt with what happened with my dad. I just put it under the bed with a whole load of other stuff,” the manifestation of repressed affective material prompts an expansion of “emotional repertoire, perspective, and sense of self” that accounts for complete experiential knowledge.⁴⁰⁴ Intersubjective transformations that occur as disparate stories are together and participants take on distinctive roles, therefore, bolster the process of supplementary becomings as one’s habitus is molded within an alternative space of creation.

You Say, I Say

A conceptual explanation of social behavior, termed Role Theory by Robert K. Merton in 1957, presupposes that individuals’ actions are “defined, in part, by the role they occupy in a relationship.”⁴⁰⁵ Obedience to socially determined roles, whether or not they accurately represent the individual, reifies the reductive labels that are often externally imposed by authoritative codifying frameworks. The adoption of a role, whether intentionally adopted or not, shapes the individual’s sense of self as they operate within those categorical boundaries. Dana Edell

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 22; Emunah 2020: 23.

⁴⁰⁵ American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association. <https://dictionary.apa.org/role-theory>.

explores these implicit biases in her work with the young participants of ViBe Theater Experience, finding that “when given the space to write and perform uncensored stories, girls will often reiterate and reinforce damaging stereotypes.”⁴⁰⁶ The subconscious impact of traumatic oppression prompted the compulsive repetition of the perception of others within the devising process rather than their authentic experiences. Thus, the enactment of an experience of affective overwhelm served to reassert restrictive estimations of identity and reify oppressive labels placed on adolescents.

Reductive Assumptions Across Generations

As part of the Manchester Speak Up performance, students from Wardle Academy staged a production titled “Category is...” in response to the many harmful, stereotypical labels often placed on adolescent individuals. In serving as representatives of stereotyped groups they themselves inhabit, the students resisted the “false sense of understanding” that often “divides us” as a result of our own prejudices.⁴⁰⁷ The students’ implication of the audience, in calling for their participation in the game-show-styled performance, called into question the audience’s initial subjective ideologies on the other-than-self in an effort to highlight the “missed opportunity for connection.”⁴⁰⁸ While not intentional, my presence in the audience prompted my own reflection of the stereotypes often placed upon America by other countries, as they inquired “If I ____, what country am I from?” Much like my own resistance to the “stereotypical American” role, the student’s resistance to predetermined, restrictive labels often placed on adolescents prompted what psycho-dramatists term “role hunger,” understood as a “desire to take

⁴⁰⁶ Edell, 51.

⁴⁰⁷ “Category is...,” 21 June 2024.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

on or experienc[e] more fully some role which is insufficiently available in real life.”⁴⁰⁹ For the students of Wardle Academy, entrance into a theatrical sphere not only engenders a hunger for freedom from imposed roles but, moreover, empowers them to “act in/as another” in a way that exposes one to the expansion of one’s “role repertoire” beyond stereotypical assumptions about adolescents.⁴¹⁰

In the theatrical exploration of alternative roles, the role itself operates as a protective barrier within which one can improvise and rehearse responses to real-life moments of affective overwhelm, those these responses may seem foreign to the socially inscribed labels that have been enforced on them. As participants navigate the negotiation of alternative identities, the expanded repertoire of roles equips the individual to negotiate traumatic situations in the realm of the real productively. The moment of theatrical enactment facilitates the transformation of the self as the actors improvise their own lived experiences through the lens of someone other-than-self. It is in this reflective process, in the transition from “body to body, eye to mouth, as text is interjected into text,” that the shift in subjective positionality between “self-being,” the role inscribed upon the individual, and “self-revelation,” the individual’s perception of their self.⁴¹¹ In this shift, rather than consistently subjecting oneself to the codifying framework of societal roles, participants integrate their lived experiences and theatrical alternatives into a once restrictive sense of self.

Victoria Elliott and Nicole Dingwall hypothesize that dramatic interventions liberate at-risk youth from the “constraints of their current interactions” by providing the “opportunity to

⁴⁰⁹ Blatner, 177.

⁴¹⁰ Schechner, Richard, and Victor W. Turner. *Between Theater & Anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, 36; Emunah 2020: 23.

⁴¹¹ Schneider, 88, Belting, 55.

practice being ‘other.’”⁴¹² In the oscillation between self and other, the sudden shift from the known to the unknown, from the “A” to the “B,” challenges the adolescent actor to enter into a mode of becomings that runs contrary to their original subjective positionality.⁴¹³ With this complete reversal of roles, the assumption of a posture other than one’s own bodies forth the attempted reconciliation of an identity predicated on socially inscribed labels and identity that accounts for an authentic inner self. *Brainstorm* evokes this proposed reconciliation in its positioning of adolescent participants in the role of their parental figures. Initial embodiments of their own parental figures are driven by stereotypical evaluations of those who assert authority over them.



Fig. 12. *Adolescents Adopt the Role of their Parents*, 2015, <https://www.companythree.co.uk/brainstorm>.

Caught “*in the spotlight*” of the stage, each individual lays bare foundational assumptions that they have made of their parents in the midst of antagonistic relationships.⁴¹⁴ Doyin, a

⁴¹² Elliott and Dingwall, 70.

⁴¹³ Hussey, 2.

⁴¹⁴ Glasier, 33.

sixteen-year-old participant described by her peers as a “head girl” who is “really clever,” reflects on her complex relationship with her mother in sharing, first and foremost, that she is “proud of her but she needs to work harder.”⁴¹⁵ Through the act of foregrounding her mother’s introduction with her repetitive criticism, Doyin comments on the overwhelming expectations that parents often place on their children. Likewise, fifteen-year-old Michael’s preliminary introduction to his father centers on his father’s assumption of his son’s deviant behavior. Through his inquiry to the audience if Michael is “being bad? Can you tell me,” the role reversal seeks to prompt the audience, populated with participants’ parents, to reflect on their stereotypical view of their children as deviant, “crap adults.”⁴¹⁶ Role, in this context, becomes a mouthpiece through which the individual’s externalize the implications of a parent’s perception of their child.

These introductions serve to foreground the antagonistic confrontations enacted through the parent duologue section, in which participants take on the roles not of their own parents but of others’ parents. The cyclical repetition of analogous experiences in which students come face to face with representations of their parents allows them to rehearse a response in a space free from consequences. As each actor vacillates between the role of self and other, child and parent, the interjection of an alternative perspective, particularly an antagonistic one, unseats the participant from a singular subjective positionality in favor of attempted reconciliation of divergent perceptions. It is in the expression of “nonhierarchical possibilities” through a response within a space of theatrical distance that adolescents are able to autonomously communicate their inner feelings in spontaneous and experimental ways. These reenactments are not intended as a vessel for character development; rather, their focus lies in the affective dynamics involved in

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, 16; 33.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, 34, 12.

“diverse relationships and interactions and accessing dormant parts of oneself” through identification with others.⁴¹⁷

Negotiating Facets of Identity through Role

Failure to account for an adolescent brain that has “way too many connections-loads and loads and loads of synapses” perpetuates an ignorance of the affective overwhelm, the “total mess,” that is inherently present in the minds of young individuals.⁴¹⁸ Assumptions of an original plurality, a concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, is marked by a “free flow of affect” and no more evident than in adolescents, as expressed by participants of *Brainstorm*. However, this productive plurality becomes detrimental when experiences of explosive affect threaten the cohesion of consciousness. In this moment of affective overwhelm, the forceful disruption of one’s temporal perception renders the individual unable to reconcile one’s past with their felt present and an envisioned future. Severance between knowledge of such an event and the emotional implications aroused by the persistent bodily sensations prompts a subjective split in which a single individual manifests several distinctive characters predicated on diverse perceptions of the self.

Taking on distinctive characters in the theatrical realm, as Renee Emunah outlines in her Integrative Five Phase model, circumvents the proclivity of adolescents to replicate problematic affective dynamics compulsively.⁴¹⁹ These characters, though always already part of the self, develop the individual’s capacity to work through the affective implications of traumatic or overwhelming moments in the real from a different perspective, one that often goes

⁴¹⁷ Emunah, 9.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 15, 19.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

unacknowledged. The performative act of transforming real characteristics of the self into embodied roles unseats one from their original subjective position and situates them as a self-reflective spectator who is both self and other or, perhaps more accurately, actor and director. Adoption of a role of authorship over one's enactment of lived experiences in the arguably safer confines of the theatrical realm bolsters an individual's ability to experiment with latent characteristics of identity and exercise power that the adolescent may not have in the outer, objective realm.

The role of authorship is, more often than not, attributed to a desire to reestablish control over the roles one occupies and the context in which those roles are played; nonetheless, the tendency to establish order within one's affective dimensions fails to account for the multiplicity with which adolescents understand themselves and how they navigate the world around them. In its conflation of space and self, *Brainstorm*'s situation of its collaboratively created performance in "a simple white stage, surrounded by plain wooden furniture" gestures at a tabula rasa, much like the blank mask, upon which adolescent identities are shaped.⁴²⁰ However, much like lived experiences mar the blank slate of a young person's identity, the cast's explosion of "their bedrooms, pulling objects and clothes out of the drawers and cupboards and making a making a massive mess" makes "a mess, a total mess" of the otherwise vacant stage.⁴²¹ The play's representation of "a collage of different teenage bedrooms" endeavors to manifest the common resistance to order, or a singular being, felt by adolescents. Doyin's explanation of her propensity to "move my room around every three weeks. I just get bored, and I move the furniture around" and Jack's assertion that he "hate[s] tidying. Why should I? It's my room" suggests a shared

⁴²⁰ Glasier, 9.

⁴²¹ Ibid, 20, 21.

desire for agency over what others deem to be a mess as they navigate “everything in it.”⁴²² As participants navigate the devising process, individual adolescents are able to explore multifaceted identities as they respond theatrically to multiple situations encountered in the real.



Fig. 13. *A mess, A total mess*, 2015, <https://www.companythree.co.uk/brainstorm>.

Rather than promoting an almost compulsive return to a controlled being, a theatrical approach driven by continuous processes of becomings reconstitutes a role not merely as a “character in a play, but an improvisation” guided by the “extraordinary potential of the teenage brain.”⁴²³ In the improvisatory process with which *Brainstorm* is devised, participants practice exploratory investigation of moments in which “something in [them] changed” as they engage in the theatrical processes of becoming.⁴²⁴ Theatrical formations of identity assemblages, an “increase in dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections,” is an apt articulation of the means by which the adolescent identity is formed as

⁴²² Ibid, 22, 21.

⁴²³ Johnson, David Read. “The theory and technique of transformations in drama therapy.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1991, pp. 285–300, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-4556\(91\)90068-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0197-4556(91)90068-1), 286; Glasier, 4.

⁴²⁴ Glasier, 53.

adolescents have “got more connections in some parts of [their] brain than [they’ll] ever have again.”⁴²⁵ Given the inherent magnitude of connections made in the adolescent brain, the process of becomings necessitates a structure that accounts for all aspects of the individual, including “the best and the worst.”⁴²⁶

Deleuze and Guattari’s principle of the rhizome gestures at the continuous negotiation of heterogeneous connections between “semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances” that can be “connected to anything other, and must be.”⁴²⁷ Company3’s exploratory workshops from which the content for *Brainstorm* was devised reflect this rhizomatic structure in its use of “strands” designed to perpetually provoke new responses and ideas rather than limit participants’ potential to create and improvise other potential connections. Contextualization of these strands within a metaphor of growth to the process of learning in the teenage brain, as Company3’s Artistic Director Ned Glasier employs the term *sprouting*, proposes a direct correlation between the overload of connections in the adolescent brain and the immense potential they have to generate alternative branches of identity without inhibition. Yet, much like the push to order within one’s affective dimensions fails to account for the multiplicity of adolescent self-perception, the application of a rhizomatic structure, though defined by its ‘substantive multiplicities,’ remains rooted in a singular, central codifying framework.

The processual formation of a complex identity necessitates entrance into Deleuze and Guattari plane of consistency as more cognitive and affective connections are made.⁴²⁸ Constitution of the theatrical realm, itself a liminal space between the real and the fictional, as a plane of consistency of multiplicities speaks to the potential for theatrical pursuits to liberate

⁴²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, 8; Glasier, 31.

⁴²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 254.

oneself from a singular, codifying framework of identity in favor of more “diverse modes of coding.”⁴²⁹ Thus, as individual actors take on alternative roles and forge connections between parts of themselves, the devised theatrical piece increases in its dimension through the promotion of interplay between “various aspects of the self and of perceptions of the world” as a means of incorporating more expansive subjectivities in the formation of one’s identity.⁴³⁰ Though to those outside the plane of consistency of multiplicities the process may be perceived as “wild and out of control,” theatrical creation empowers individuals to participate in the process of “becoming who I am.”⁴³¹

Expanding Perceptions of Self

Operation within a space of metaxis, where the imagined and the real are intertwined, emancipates the young individuals from the previously conceived circumstances of identity that have played a role in shattering the self. Creative physical changes within a theatrical space traverse the boundaries of common perception in their capacity to elicit changes both in the actors themselves and in their ability to manage moments of affective overwhelm from another perspective. In a state of theatrically determined fugitivity, transversal movement across boundaries of the imagined and the real does not validate a rigid, linguistic construction of the self but works to craft a role-of-self which accounts for the multifaceted “perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive” elements that influence identity through the excavation of dormant parts of oneself.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁴³⁰ St. Thomas and Johnson, 105.

⁴³¹ Glasier, 57.

⁴³² Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

Expansion of one's role repertoire with the often repressed characteristics through the practice of dramatic projection as the "shadow part of the person can be tolerated and given voice via the sanctioned theatrical role" and, consequently, permits the individual to "sit beside each part of [themselves]."⁴³³ The production of a requisite link between one's external representation and their internal affective dimensions as participants are able to unearth and enact responses before these behaviors are officially integrated into the real. With each newly integrated response, there is a gradual shift in one's perception of self as they operate differently in their social framework. Such participation in a space of play, in the crossing of affective boundaries, equips the fugitive explorer with the transformative potential that permeates perceptual understandings of the self.

The intentional, often intensive, assessment of "emotions, roles, relationships, and conflicts in current life situations" gives rise to "profound levels of introspection" through which one might come to terms with the uncertainties of the future in the wake of experiences of affective overwhelm.⁴³⁴ *Brainstorm*'s embodiment of the apprehensions that arise when face to face with lived affect, particularly in the presence of an audience of adversarial witnesses, through the actors' movement across the implied boundary between audience and stage. The transversality of this moment "feels dangerous, like he might do or say anything" as Michael confronts the audience with the fear that the actor's authority figures "don't know who I am anymore/ I worry you've given up on me."⁴³⁵ Acknowledgment of the danger implicit in such a direct confrontation of the authority figures who populate the audience situates the final performance not as the end result of a therapeutic process but as a part of a process that continues

⁴³³ Emunah, 9; Ibid, 134.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁴³⁵ Glasier, 43.

well after the curtain closes. In presenting the audience with an invitation into the process, the young actors prompt them to reflect upon what they have observed and, concurrently, envision their role in the evolution of the social realities in which they operate.

Obscuration of the boundary between witness and actor perpetuates the integration of diverse perspectives into an expanded subjectivity by facilitating the occupation of a subjective positionality separate from one's own. Exemplified by the "bucket containing the cards" upon which audience members "write a message to their teenage self," the facilitation of open dialogue between the cast and the audience intends to not only remind the audience of the perspective they previously held but also to inform the audience that there are aspects of their children that they "don't know yet./ But you will."⁴³⁶ Conversely, the interjection of an alternative perspective, particularly an antagonistic one, unseats the participant from a singular subjective positionality in favor of the attempted reconciliation of divergent perceptions. By exposing the actors to the audience's perspective, the cards serve to inform young individuals of "what it's like/From [the former's] point of view."⁴³⁷ Reciprocal expansion of subjectivity that incorporates multiple perspectives facilitates a reflection on how young individuals are perceived by others as well as the impact that such a subjective position has on their self-perception and overall mental health.

Rest in the Mess: Creative Implications within Adolescent Affective Dimensions

Akin to Gabrielle Schwab's "psychic tomb" where individuals "harbor an undead ghost," the inarticulatory and inaccessible characteristics of affective noise go unwitnessed which, in

⁴³⁶ Ibid, 64.

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 58.

turn, leaves “in its wake a ‘kind of haunting.’”⁴³⁸ Foreclosed grief in the wake of loss, be it loss of stability, loss of affective accessibility, loss of trust in the world, etc., the resistance to mourning engenders a transformation into the “living dead” who is no longer able to understand the full complexity of oneself and the world in which they operate.⁴³⁹ Internalization of affective overwhelm manifests in a myriad of mental health-related struggles, including but not limited to “anxiety, depression, (di)stress and posttraumatic stress, timidity, obsessive-compulsive disorder, interpersonal sensitivity, and somatization,” through which one is rendered “utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening.”⁴⁴⁰ Appearances of clinical symptoms are not merely an extension of this death drive as adolescent mental health struggles exist before the psychical manifestation of affective dimensions through behavior. Retained in the body, affective experiences become the determining factor of the adolescent’s ability to problem-solve and envision future relationships and behavior.

Psychological Underpinnings of Adolescent Mental Health

To underestimate the magnitude of experiences steeped in affective overwhelm on the adolescent mind promotes the relegation of negative behavioral dynamics to the simplistic codification of deviance. The “state of hyper-arousal” that one encounters in traumatizing situations worsens the already fatalistic lack of emotional stability during an already tumultuous time in the adolescent phase of development. Similar to the dominant traits of post-traumatic stress disorder, occurrences considered to be uncontrollable “extreme ‘stressor’ events” produce somatic disturbances through the disruption of memory and, consequently, identity.⁴⁴¹ Cognitive

⁴³⁸ Schwab, 1; Ferguson, 36.

⁴³⁹ Schwab, 2.

⁴⁴⁰ Berghs et al., 1374; Brison, 40.

⁴⁴¹ Haughton, 7.

distortions associated with adolescent experiences of affective overwhelm “freezes the mental sense of time and produces an internal temporal standstill” in which traumatic memory is no longer accessible or entirely digestible. Such incomprehensibility prolongs the affective impact of these moments as one attempts to make sense of an event that they are unable to come to terms with completely. As young individuals attempt to negotiate the implications of that which resists understanding, the psychological dimensions of the adolescent brain manifest in symptoms that force themselves “tyrannically upon the conscious mind” and perpetuate an overwhelming, repetitive mindset wherein singular affects are decentered.⁴⁴²

As affects are displaced through traumatic repression, adolescent affective topographies shatter into alternative lines of flight that decenter singular estimations of perceptual knowledge predicated on emotional encounters with external events. Deleuze and Guattari posit that in the wake of affect displacement, becomings “catapult forward and combine into blocks” through processes of supplementarity negotiations.⁴⁴³ Affective and ideological “doings” that shape such becomings body forth traumatic occurrences that impress upon the conscious mind and subjective processes, including memory, affect, and imaginative exploration.⁴⁴⁴ Associations between depressive and anxious moods and subjective processes seek to codify the uncodifiable, those elements of a personality that determine, to some degree, that ground existence yet consistently go unacknowledged by the conscious mind. Avoidance of overwhelming affect only reinforces the vulnerability and susceptibility to additional affective overwhelm across temporal boundaries.

⁴⁴² Jung 1921, 131.

⁴⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari 267.

⁴⁴⁴ Dolan, 7.

In an effort to protect an individual from further traumatization, signal anxiety manifests symptoms, such as “compulsive repetition, problematic confusion with Self and Other, [and] a general milieu of potential vulnerability and disorientation,” which perpetually reproduce the traumatic affect that emerges in a moment of overwhelm.⁴⁴⁵ Yet, that which seeks to protect the individual simultaneously constitutes that with which emotionally-charged “trauma becomes ossified” and one’s hyper-vigilant, affective topography is expanded.⁴⁴⁶ Psychosocial problems that emerge out of this heightened state, as a direct result of traumatic affect’s inability to “overflow the blocked reservoir of its own moment,” obstruct the productive development of one’s self-esteem as their conscious attitude around the self is altered into that which may conceal cognitive distortions.⁴⁴⁷ While this may seem counterintuitive to the containment that is often advocated for in the therapeutic process, the act of harnessing this overflow of affect in moments of overwhelm with agents of intrinsic fugitivity amplifies the therapeutic efficacy of theatrical processes.

Navigating Affective Topographies

Within the theatrical process, alternative lines of flight are generated as the actor’s affective dimensions pervade “the aesthetic space with new significations” while simultaneously awakening “diverse forms of intensities, emotions, sensations, and thoughts” within adolescent participants.⁴⁴⁸ Interchangeable signification of affect broadens as individuals excavate and cultivate repressed lines of affective or ideological flight that were once inaccessible. Resistant to

⁴⁴⁵ Haughton, 3.

⁴⁴⁶ Saketopoulou, 1.

⁴⁴⁷ Bohleber, 342.

⁴⁴⁸ Boal, 21.

restrictive codification, the transformational multiplicities that emerge out of these affective, signifying chains fragment and consolidate elements of subjectivity, perception, and personality that seek assimilation rather than repression. That which arises from the transformative processes disrupts the supposed “cohesive perceptual experience” around which the self is performatively, constituted and self-esteem is manufactured.⁴⁴⁹ As the “protagonist-patient” reproduces their own thoughts and emotions, creative and therapeutic processes facilitate the negotiation of action and affect that influence one’s performative personality.

Phil Jones posits that in the interface between attitudinal dynamics and self-esteem, the tension that emerges between identity and overall well-being is most aptly negotiated within the performative work of theatre-based therapies.⁴⁵⁰ Intervention programs that centralize processes of therapeutic theatre, predominantly when participants are self-selected, often emphasize the internal narrative perspective that functions as a determinate factor in the representation of one’s interior affect. External elaborations of interior circumstances prompt the generation of responses that cross affective borders, facilitating alternative lines of flight and, consequently, the expansion of affective topographies to ameliorate adolescent mental-health-related challenges. Theatrical “perspective taking,” the adoption of another subjective positionality, serves as an agent of transformation that bears the potential to unseat depressive and/or anxious symptoms of affective overwhelm that result in assertive, often aggressive behaviors.

Etched upon the surface of the body, forgotten or repressed experiential knowledge repeats itself behaviorally as the individual struggles to reconcile affect, what is felt and embodied, with cognition, how it is understood in the aftermath. The innate propensity of the body to “reinstate ways of knowing and to escape cognitive forms of control” situates power

⁴⁴⁹ Damasio.

⁴⁵⁰ Jones, 69.

over the self within the corporeal realm.⁴⁵¹ To work through fragmented shards of memory through embodied action necessitates a dissolution of the mind/body dichotomy and, consequently, an awareness of determinate psychological factors that impact behavior, whether traumatic or otherwise, impulsive or compulsive. Unconscious motivations that “manifest in conscious physical effects, as well as unconscious ones,” incite the continuous integration of emotional lines of flight into one’s affective and behavioral topography that threaten to limit “all other possibilities” of the future through moments of overwhelm.⁴⁵²

Freud posits that, bound by traumatic affect, the individual does “not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out” in the process of reproduction through behavior rather than a cognitive memory.⁴⁵³ This embodied recall endeavors to translate the traumatic impact, though imperceptibly, into everyday relational and individual landscapes around which behavior and identity are manifested processually. Continuous collisions between self-expression, the “will to show one’s emotion,” and self-control, the “desire or compulsion to regulate the emotion,” attempt to attribute individual meaning to a moment of overwhelming affect in order to facilitate comprehension of that which is incomprehensible.⁴⁵⁴ In this arguably analytical process, one is able to participate in the creation of authentic affective experiences and the impact such attributed meaning has on the self that one is becoming. Nevertheless, to rely solely on the resurgence of forgotten or repressed meaning in order to gain control over the overwhelming feelings that emerge in traumatic experiences fails to account for the bodily symptoms of psychological concerns.

⁴⁵¹ Hillman, David, and Ulrika Maude. “Introduction.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, edited by David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, pp. 1–9, 4.

⁴⁵² Lacan, 749; Jung 2014: 124.

⁴⁵³ Freud, 150.

⁴⁵⁴ Belting, 4.

Similarly, therapeutic processes that centralize the narrativization of traumatic memory reify the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy and, thereby, disregard the negative, bio-psychological implications of affective overwhelm. In adolescence, these implications surface as forms of youth violence, such as bullying, fighting, and threats, that resist authentic representation in favor of the reproduction of traumatic affect through behavioral aggression. In the process of devising theatrical works with therapeutic intent, actors are able to “trace of emotion and aggression in the gestural signature of the artist” as they navigate the creative space.⁴⁵⁵ Beyond the perception of bodily symptoms as “disguises and displacements of traumatic memories,” the act of staging somatic memories and the affective dimensions through which they are felt produces behavioral symptoms or enactments that constitute an embodied, perceptual self that is unbound by behaviors that externally represent the Freudian death drive, a drive that shatters one’s sense of self, born out of traumatic affect.⁴⁵⁶

Self-Determination in the Midst of Mess

As agents of imagination, children’s innate propensity for play is incorporated into therapeutic theatre as young actors enact experiences of distress. Participation in theatrical role-play and devising processes, particularly with adolescents, models productive behaviors and navigates complex affective topographies whose coherence has been impaired by affective overwhelm. Destruction of the definitive concepts that shape this topographical landscape erodes the boundaries that work to codify the “deepest layers of human subjectivity in which identity is rooted.”⁴⁵⁷ The erosion of affective boundaries fractures the continuity of experiential

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, 222.

⁴⁵⁶ Cohen, 215.

⁴⁵⁷ Bohleber, 344.

thought through which the subjective and embodied self is represented, resisting a general sense of coherence. It is in this lack of coherence that unconscious, compulsive instinct arises within an individual, an instinct that Jung argues is “so feared by civilized man.”⁴⁵⁸ Yet, to perceive compulsiveness and instinct as mutually exclusive and, thus, fear them both, threatens to reduce the “extraordinary potential of the teenage brain” and the productive capacity of instinctive risk in a time of adolescent exploration and generation.⁴⁵⁹

My Brain is Like My Bedroom

Perception of the adolescent self as “broken” reifies the adult fear of what they do not understand, much like the charged, relational affective dimensions elicited as Noah “starts to wander into the audience-it feels dangerous, like he might do or say anything.”⁴⁶⁰ As Noah performs actions of uncertainty in *Brainstorm*, he exhibits a performative self that bodies forth the complexity of the adolescent mind that is, more often than not, perceived as a mess. Much like the “simple white stage, surrounded by plain wooden furniture” disrupted by a “tangled set of switches on long cables” like the exponential quantity of affective and cognitive connections assembled during adolescence.⁴⁶¹ Antonio Damasio posits that affective overwhelm is exacerbated when “subjective experiences are accompanied by feelings,” thereby augmenting the dimensions of an individual’s affective topography that are embodied by said cables and switches.⁴⁶² Attempts to reconcile the broken chains of affect in the wake of traumatic experience necessitates a deterritorialized space in which participants, particularly adolescents,

⁴⁵⁸ Jung 2014: 118.

⁴⁵⁹ Glasier, 4.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, 56; 43.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid, 9; 39.

⁴⁶² Damasio.

can express their complex, individualized selves. The actor's consistent recognition that "my brain is like my bedroom. It's a total mess" is followed by the assertion that "it's got everything in it," or that the experiential knowledge gained in their lives influences their perception of themselves and the world around them.⁴⁶³



Fig. 14. *My Brain is like My Bedroom*, 2015, <https://www.companythree.co.uk/brainstorm>.

By staging the association between space and subjectivity, the adolescent brain and the adolescent bedroom, *Brainstorm* seeks to empower participants to explore this "over-exposure of self, lack of self-control and overwhelming feelings of self-consciousness" in a comfortable space wherein they have some semblance of authority.⁴⁶⁴ In this space, individuals are able to express aggression and, more productively, high-risk behavior without fear of real-world consequences. Therapeutic theatre techniques seek to harness this risky behavior as a vehicle for "remediation, rehabilitation, or personal or social adjustments" that bring about "intrapsychic, interpersonal, and behavioral changes" that influence a reconstitution of identity amongst

⁴⁶³ Glasier, 21.

⁴⁶⁴ Lehtonen, 111.

adolescent participants.⁴⁶⁵ The potential of art to shatter, be it structure, subjectivity, identity, etc., in order to reveal necessities, to some degree, the taking of definitive risks that grant autonomy over the negotiation of behavioral and affective becomings through processes of reflection and play.

Affective-Becomings

Incorporation of imaginative play in modes of physical expression or becomings relies not on impulse or risk but on the creative instinct that reconciles the destruction and construction of a perceptual self. The “creative-affirmative” force of instinct drives forth a sense of self that is not composed of “units but of dimensions,” akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s lines of flight, from which ongoing fugitive explorations of affective becomings occur. Throughout the *Brainstorm* devising process, typical teenage behaviors become central to each collaborator’s development, as the risks taken aid in such becomings. As the production took shape, actors were asked to take “positive risk” influenced by the “combination of all the messy changes happening in their brains” that imbue the adolescent mind with immense potential. The chaotic and explosive nature of the actor’s action during the course of the climactic “massive party: wild, chaotic, out of control” wherein the cast dances, wrestles, and performs other expressive behaviors prompts a necessary reconfiguration of their sense of self under new conditions unbound by rigid, affective structures.⁴⁶⁶

The process of theatrical creation engenders the reorganization of cognitive and perceptual reorganization as the repetitious enactment of overwhelming encounters influences

⁴⁶⁵ Irwin 23, quoted in Jones 5.

⁴⁶⁶ Glasier, 50.

the means by which a given scenario is contextualized and codified.⁴⁶⁷ An actor's theatrical rehearsal or repetition of lived experiences serves to recapitulate the past under new conditions in a contemporary moment, integrating knowledge, feelings, and beliefs obtained in the aftermath. With each rehearsal of the event, the actor is able to relive the scene with what Boal terms "re-emotion."⁴⁶⁸ The constitution of affective dimensions within an aesthetic space generates alternative significations under which alternative emotional lines of flight are codified and understood. Within this codification process, previously inexperienceable emotions lose their "foreign-body structure through an affective remembrance" in favor of formless, exploratory feeling that incorporates both mind and body.⁴⁶⁹

Through the further dissolution of the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, theatrical rehearsal of behavior embodies the composite perception that encompasses both the state of the body during the initial experience of affective overwhelm and the state of consciousness altered as one's affective and perceptual topographies are expanded. Sama's declaration that her "brain isn't finished yet./My Limbic System is hyper./ My prefrontal cortex isn't ready./But think of all the things you can do./If you've still got all those connections" aptly articulates the continuous process of development in adolescence that has not yet reached its conclusion.⁴⁷⁰ As affects are displaced in moments of chaotic yet exploratory overwhelm, individuals become entrenched in a multiplicitous, continuous state of becomings that resist a state of restrictive being. By once again imploring the audience to "look at us" at the end of *Brainstorm*, a repetition of the opening sequence, the participants demand the acknowledgement of an identity still in process, rather than one predicated on adolescent stereotypes.

⁴⁶⁷ McNiff, 15.

⁴⁶⁸ Boal, 25.

⁴⁶⁹ Bohleber, 338.

⁴⁷⁰ Glasier, 54.

Coda: Reflection through Expression

Theatrical expression, particularly that which is related to role, facilitates self-realization among actors by establishing bonds between their self-perception and the feelings they experience. The distance created in stepping outside of oneself, and into the role of the other, promotes reflection of lived, affective experiences that may resist complete comprehension, yet nonetheless implicate the sense of self. The affective frameworks through which one perceives these images and the conscious meaning attributed to them shapes the subjective perception of oneself. Thus, representations of this perception within an aesthetic, theatrical realm advocate for participants' rehearsal of the development of a perceptual self that is influenced by the complex range of emotions felt during difficult and chaotic times.

In the devising process for *Brainstorm*, individual determinations of self in aesthetic space serve as the impetus of the episodic plot of the end product. The cast was invited to anonymously reveal "personal material that isn't themselves compromised by collaboration" and, thereby, not bound by the confines of stereotypical perceptions.⁴⁷¹ Punctuation of the play with reintroduction through short monologues that contrast what is known about the past, present, and future exhibits a self-perception that contradicts initial estimations of their identity. This opportunity to reveal facts about themselves, as individuals who "might not be who you want me to be/Or who you are," reinforces the self-determinations made throughout the process of theatrical becomings.⁴⁷² Driven by "post-traumatic growth," which transforms an "individual's way of understanding the world and their place in it," therapeutic theatrical

⁴⁷¹ Glasier, 69.

⁴⁷² Ibid, 57.

processes allow for a recontextualization of an adolescent brain that “isn’t broken./It’s beautiful.”⁴⁷³

⁴⁷³ Patterson and Sextou, 90; Glasier, 56.

Looking Back, Reaching Forward:
Future Directions of Therapeutic Theatre Work

The exploration of the potent intersections between therapeutic devised theatre practices and the complex phenomenon of affective overwhelm in adolescents presented here seeks to answer the question “What are the therapeutic implications of collaboratively created theatre when working with adolescents who have experienced moments of affective overwhelm?” By interrogating the creative, cognitive, and embodied dimensions of theatrical collaboration, particularly in programs such as the National Theatre’s Speak Up initiative, the National Theatre’s Connections Festival, Company3’s *Brainstorm* blueprint and the production created from it, and MCC’s *Uncensored* series, this research underscores how collaborative theatrical environments can foster introspection, healing, and identity formation for adolescents navigating distressing affective experiences.

Looking Back

A key theme that runs through all case studies and theoretical framings is the primacy of process over product. Devised theatre, particularly in youth-centered settings, thrives in the tension between open-ended creative processes and the production of a final staged performance. Rather than emphasizing the culmination of a polished piece, the more palpable therapeutic potential of collaborative creation lies in the “small wins” of emotional articulation, embodied experimentation, and relational trust that occur during the creative journey. Programs like *Speak Up!* resist the theatrical imperative of the “shiny performance” in favor of reconstituting the rehearsal spaces into a laboratory wherein adolescents can explore the intersections of memory, identity, and affect. These processes resist traditional dramaturgical closure, instead generating a

constantly evolving landscape for affective negotiation. The research confirms that therapeutic benefit is most potent when adolescents maintain agency in co-creating the terms, boundaries, and content of their theatrical work.

Another critical finding concerns the expressive limitations of language when confronting deeply repressed or traumatic affect. Affective overwhelm, understood as a collapse of cognitive and emotional coherence, resists conventional narrative or the therapeutic articulation of traditional talk therapy. Collaboratively created theatre, particularly in its embodied and multisensory dimensions, offers a powerful counterpoint. Through physical movement, metaphorical play, and kinesthetic storytelling, young collaborators are able to access and communicate affective truths that elude verbalization. Whether through stage combat, beatboxing, or ensemble-based improvisation, participants find channels for embodied reenactment of previously inarticulatory experiences. The research demonstrates that such modes of expression circumvent the Guattarian “mirage effect” of adult-imposed narratives, allowing participants to explore their past through their own symbolic and sensory lexicons.

A core theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing fragmentation not as pathology but as a valid expression of adolescent subjectivity post-affective overwhelm. Drawing from Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzian multiplicities, the research affirms that therapeutic transformation arises not from restoring coherence or wholeness, but from engaging with the fragmented self on its own terms. Thus, collaborative theatre becomes a space for nonlinear, episodic, and multivocal exploration, where fractured memories and affective shards are treated as material for creative play. The *Uncensored*, *Brainstorm*, and *Speak Up!* productions, among others, embrace non-conventional theatrical techniques, including simultaneous stagings, layered storytelling, and episodic structures, which allow participants to

hold multiple truths, perspectives, and timelines in their conscious mind at once. This research, therefore, positions devised theatre as a site for “dissective-cohesive” meaning-making: a performative practice that honors rupture while facilitating new affective, cognitive, and embodied configurations.

The investigation into transversal movement across affective, spatial, and temporal boundaries reveals a key mechanism for therapeutic efficacy in theatrical devising work. Participants in the observed programs demonstrated an ability to move between affective states, like fear, shame, anger, hope, etc., and to situate these in both real and fictional contexts. Transversality, in this context, enables adolescents to deconstruct binary emotional categories and rehearse new subjective positions. The repeated movement between personal memory, fictionalization, and collective enactment allows for what Boal terms “re-emotion,” described as a recursive emotional experience that grants the individual a degree of authorship over overwhelming affect. Performance offers a space for safe experimentation with volatile emotional material, enabling participants to build resilience in a semi-scaffolded, supportive environment.

Finally, the research affirms the role of dialogic performance in fostering continued therapeutic development beyond the rehearsal or performance space. Theatrical creation in these contexts is inherently dialogic, not just in verbal exchange but in its emphasis on reciprocal, embodied knowledge. Participants interrogate shared experiences (e.g., mental health, racism, safety) and contribute to a collective affective archive as individuals navigate analogous lived experiences in the collaborative space. The productions I have engaged with over the course of research exemplify this dialogic ethos, interweaving monologues, vignettes, spoken word, and movement to create an open text. These unconventional productions, consequently, invite rather

than conclude discussion. Participants' reflections suggest that meaningfulness, rather than fixed meaning, becomes elevated as a more effective element of the therapeutic process.

Meaningfulness here is understood not as narrative resolution but as subjective affirmation through its recognition that each collaborator's feelings, memories, and perspectives matter.

Thus, bearing in mind the therapeutic potential of collaborative theatricality, a paradigm shift in how educators, therapists, and practitioners approach affective work with adolescents. Rather than framing healing as the attainment of closure or coherence, it is in the act of embracing ongoing, embodied processes that foreground multiplicity, contradiction, and creative agency that adolescents are able to work through moments of overwhelming, distressing affect that, from an adolescent perspective, may be deemed traumatic. Collaboratively created theatre processes provide fertile ground for this kind of work, particularly when guided by trauma-informed, nonhierarchical facilitation. Practitioners must be cautious, however, of the impulse to codify or finalize the work too early through scripts or imposed narrative structures. While scripts may aid in the externalization of affective experiences, they should remain tools within a broader, more flexible toolbox of therapeutic, theatrical elements with which young people might engage, including but by no means limited to improvisation, movement, visual representation, and dialogic exchange.

Therapeutic, theatrical devising is not a panacea, nor should it be. The process's rejection of a solidified conclusion, resistance to mastery, and its embrace of contradiction constitute an open space for the continuous improvisation of alternative futures. What this research affirms is that adolescents, a population often underestimated or unheard, hold within them a capacity for profound creative insight and exploratory transversality. When given the space to shape the process, occupy stories steeped in the past, and body forth their authentic truths, they not only

rehearse change but generate it in the real. In this way, collaboratively created theatre is not only an efficacious process of healing; Rather, it is a form of becomings that is neither linear nor final. They are ongoing, recursive, and transformative, offering each participant the opportunity to reclaim authorship over their affective histories and write new possibilities into their futures.

Limitations

The conclusions reached by the various case studies should be viewed and understood in light of the limitations faced during this research. There are three predominant impediments to the study that shape the conclusions reached: accessibility, analytical biases, and time. The first and, perhaps, most impactful obstacle that emerged was a lack of accessibility to both archival material and discussion with adolescent participants. As I began my initial navigation of the documented materials, there was a lack of archived adolescent-driven scripts and performances. The restrictions placed upon this material, be it out of institutional collection policies or privacy concerns, limited the scope of my research as it left a multitude of performances out of reach. Moreover, after months of attempts to gain access to the current collaboratively created theatrical process, both archived and in-person, and being met with understandable hesitation, I was granted access to the *Speak Up!* program's celebration. These events served as a culmination of the year-long creative work that the disparate groups had completed. While the ability to observe these performances was beneficial to the overall project, I was unable to interview the young participants individually. As a result, I found myself having to rely on interviews with adult facilitators who worked directly with the adolescents, which, in turn, restricted the depth and breadth of the study.

Reliance on an adult perspective risks skewing the analytical approach to the devised work, as it perpetuates the repression of adolescent perspectives that often occurs. Thus, the second limitation faced during this research was the analytical biases stemming from the reasonable restriction of access to young participants. Constituting facilitator perspectives as a lens through which to view the subjective implications of therapeutic, theatrical work left a significant gap between what was feasibly able to influence my conclusions and the authentic experiences I sought to represent. Thus, unbiased adolescent perspectives came from my analysis of the observations and performances themselves rather than the collaborators' reflections on the processes and culminating performances. Such an obstacle raised the question of whether future research is possible due to the ethics surrounding work with adolescents. The ethical ramifications of working with adolescents that emerged out of this work include managing confidentiality, addressing potential risks and benefits when dealing with sensitive topics, and obtaining informed consent. Such implications have not only affected the interviews I was able to conduct during my observations but also impacted the timeline of the workshop I am currently conducting, which aims to put the theoretical principles outlined in this research into practice.

Reaching Forward

Driven by the application of a deconstructionist theoretical framework, exploration of the collaborative process of theatrical creation gestures at the productive potential of noise, chaos, and transversality in working through experiences of affective overwhelm. Future work will provide adolescents with a non-invasive, safe environment in which they can explore their past and work through traumatic experiences through performance. The lived experiences of participants from varied backgrounds will serve as the foundation for the creation of original,

theatrical works to explore the therapeutic potential of the process as the students seek to envision and embody emerging futures regardless of their past. Furthermore, boundaries and safety protocols are equally critical to avoid oversharing and protect confidentiality, with measures such as anonymity through assigned numbers supporting these aims. Providing clear expectations, connecting participants to follow-up resources, and maintaining ethical safeguards will be essential to ensuring that the project's positive impact endures beyond its timeline. Exploration of the ongoing, transformative potential of these theatre companies and their work, in direct conversation with the foundational principles of trauma and performance theories highlights the productive potential of collaboratively created theatre processes for adolescent populations. Thus, those practices that have emerged as the most fertile serve as guiding principles for the development of a therapeutic theatrical toolbox and for facilitators of collaborative theatre therapy, including myself, as they learn to accept the affective and metaphorical “mess” of adolescent experience.

Proposed Workshop

Abstract

The program aims to harness the transformative power of theater to facilitate therapeutic expression, foster community engagement, and rehearse social change. By providing an accessible platform for adolescent voices and stories, this initiative seeks to empower marginalized communities, promote cultural diversity, and build social cohesion through the art of performance. This proposal outlines a comprehensive approach to writing and theatre that includes workshops, productions, and collaborative projects designed to uplift individuals and strengthen community ties.

Project Information

Severe stressors and adverse life experiences leave a significant impact on the body, the mind, the nervous system, and relationships. Such stressors can often lead to a survival response, which involves activation of the fight/flight/freeze/cry response. Adverse childhood experiences can stem from primary attachment wounds such as separation from family, neglect, or displacement.

Young people, especially, are not developmentally able to make the connections between life events and their present feelings through words. Different approaches are needed for participants who come to therapy to work on healing from a traumatic event, or for clients seeking healing from complex traumas woven throughout several aspects of their lives. Therapeutic theatre techniques provide an opportunity to explore feelings, experiences, and relationships. Through this work, adolescents can learn to label the situation and its surrounding emotional complexity accurately.

Theater has long served as a powerful medium for storytelling, enabling individuals to express their experiences, values, and aspirations. In several communities, however, access to the performing arts remains limited, preventing residents from fully participating in and contributing to their cultural narratives. The program seeks to bridge this gap by providing opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage in the theater-making process that may present adolescents with therapeutic opportunities.

This initiative will focus on creating a supportive environment where adolescents can explore their creativity, share their stories, and connect with one another. Projective techniques or story making allow individuals to explore memories or share details of past events. This work can offer methods for exploration of those adverse memories that approach them from a variety of alternative angles. Embodiment practices enable clients to be fully present in their senses and self-regulate as they navigate their lived experiences, helping to bring people out of the past and into the present..

Vision

The vision for this project is to provide adolescents with a safe and supportive environment where they can explore and work through adverse experiences.

Mission Statement

The mission of this project is to help adolescent individuals heal, grow, and change through movement, story, and theater.

Issue/Target Population

My focus is on young people from 4th grade to 8th grade who have faced adverse childhood experiences. This will be a non-invasive, voluntary program scaffolded around student safety and comfort. Students will be given a corresponding number to ensure anonymity throughout the process.

Project Goals

- Empower adolescent voices that may be left unaddressed.
- Encourage community engagement and collaboration.
- Monitor and evaluate alternative, non-invasive strategies for adolescent therapy.

Working Curriculum

This project believes in the cultivation of imaginative and creative work that may facilitate therapeutic explorations of adverse adolescent experiences in order to foster self-discovery, learning, and community engagement. The sessions will not give students extensive time to prepare to employ naturally organic responses. The chart below offers the core concepts that we may address over the course of a 6–8-week period.

Workshop Schedule

	Exercise	Devising
Week 1	What’s all this Drama?: Students will have brainstorming sessions on the reasons for drama, discover what dynamics make a story dramatic, why certain details are memorable and others forgettable Scripted role: Scripted role-playing gives the participant the opportunity to function as another person, usually based on a script or text describing the individual. The participant studies the role, attempts to understand the individual, and often finds that they can relate to certain factors in the character’s experience.	Conflict and Tension: Students will identify and create recipes for conflict, perform scenes with high tension and exceedingly high stakes. Action and Motivation: Students will identify and invent motivations for actions. They will also demonstrate their understanding of the concept of motivation. Students will perform clear actions on stage and identify the differences between action and inaction onstage.

Week 2	Status: Students will demonstrate their understanding of “high” vs. “low” status characteristics based on biblical principles, identifying and describing power relationships in scenes as well as the power that they have as children of God. The students will also learn what makes a character have high or low status, what makes people have power in scenes, how physicality as well as the way a character sits, moves, or behaves, reveal his or her status. Character: Students will invent and perform characters. Students will brainstorm and identify how physical characteristics affect personality, movement, and body language. They will also learn how the scene or environment is communicated through the performer.	Dialogue vs. Monologue: Students will understand how to improvise and write effective dialogues that propel scenes forward. Students will demonstrate understanding of monologues and what monologues reveal about your character? The Dramatic Event: Students will construct a “complete dramatic event” in their writing. It could be based on their past experiences so they can identify the elements of a dramatic event and how God might be working through that experience.
Week 3	Improvitational role: Unlike the scripted role, participants acting out an improvisational role are given minimal guidance on the character and allowed to create their personality spontaneously. The actor in an improvisational role will undoubtedly draw from their own experiences, memories, and assumptions to create a personality, making it an exercise in self-expression, whether the actor is aware of each aspect of their self that seeps through or not.	Structures: Students will learn to identify and create different structures for their writing and performance. Community Stories: Students will learn to identify things that may be affecting their community. Students will engage in creative problem solving using their art to address community issues. Students will learn about arranging their ideas in plans, identifying available resources, implementation, and follow-up

Week 4	Forum Theater: Forum Theater is an interactive and participatory activity that encourages individuals to explore and transform real-life situations or conflicts into a safe and supportive environment. In this exercise, participants create short scenes or scenarios that depict challenging or problematic situations they have encountered. The scenes are then performed in front of the group, who function as "spect-actors" – individuals who can pause the scene, step in, and offer alternative solutions or responses. It provides an opportunity for participants to explore new strategies, gain insight into their own behaviors, and experiment with alternative ways of approaching difficult situations.	Devising in Community: Students will choose the stories that they want to include in the final performance and finalize the “script” using affinity mapping. Affinity Mapping: An affinity diagram (sometimes known as an affinity map or affinity chart) is a visual tool that helps you organize information from a brainstorming session. Participants sort ideas into diverse groups or categories based on their relationships with one another.
Week 5	Storytelling circle: A group of people takes turns telling a story, with each person adding a sentence. You can choose a theme ahead of time or try an improv prompt (more on that below) or just ask the first person to wing it and go from there!	Rehearsal for the final performance
Week 6	Run through before the performance	
Final Performance	Students will perform the performance they have created to an audience of family and friends.	

Workshop Implications

My approach to the creation of this therapeutic, theatrical workshop is driven by the theory and practice that this study engages with. This proposed workshop carries significant therapeutic implications for adolescent participants. By engaging in collaborative theatre,

students are offered a safe and non-invasive means of navigating and expressing the affective complexity of their lived experiences. Movement, role-play, and embodiment praxes may aid in the embodied processing of affective overwhelm, the development of self-regulation skills, and the means by which traumatic affect remains present in their bodies. This approach provides an effective alternative to traditional talk therapy, allowing participants to navigate Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) at a depth and pace aligned with their comfort and preparation.

Furthermore, the proposed workshop moves beyond the individuals as it also permeates the broader community. Collaboratively created theatre fosters a sense of belonging, builds trust among young collaborators, and strengthens interpersonal connections between adolescents in a space free of dominant, codifying frameworks. By amplifying marginalized voices, the project contributes to more inclusive, authentic narratives and challenges social silences around affective overwhelm, displacement, and experiences deemed traumatic by adolescents but not by adult perspectives. Such empowerment bears the capacity to influence participants' relationships, family dynamics, and subsequent engagement with their communities as they envision alternative futures.

Moreover, participants develop beneficial, transferable skills, such as communication, collaboration, and creative problem-solving, all of which support personal growth. The process of reframing and reshaping lived experiences encourages critical thinking and agency, aiding students' ability to imagine identities beyond those inscribed upon them by others. If successful, the model could be adapted for other underserved populations, offering both practical and research-based evidence for the value of collaboratively created theatre as therapeutic within both individual and communal contexts.

Research Implications

The conclusions reached in this research have potentially beneficial implications for the fields of devised theatre, education, and youth therapy practice. Through this study, I sought to situate collaboratively created theatre processes as an effective means of ameliorating affective overwhelm among adolescents, particularly when grounded in participant agency, embodied exploration, and sustained collaboration. The creation of a liminal, theatrical environment wherein individuals traverse the boundaries between imaginative and realistic realms emerges as a crucial element in the negotiation of affective dimensions and identity. Such spaces allow participants to explore multiple temporalities, rehearse alternative responses, and construct provisional identities through positive risk-taking and exploration without fear of real-world consequences. Within this liminal space, embodied play and improvisation can foster access and articulate affective experiences that remain inaccessible to purely linguistic or narrative frameworks. These play-based praxes have direct implications for therapeutic practice in its necessitation of modalities that integrate physical, sensory, and improvisational approaches alongside, or in place of, scripted work.

In underscoring the therapeutic value of devised theatre that lies in the process rather than the final product, programs that focus on polished performances risk constraining authentic expression, particularly when thematic or structural frameworks are imposed externally. While public performance can serve as an essential moment of sharing, treating this external presentation as the ultimate goal limits the productive potential through restrictive codification. Thus, this research advocates for the act of resting in the mess in order to maintain continuous, productive negotiations of creative potential in the messy, exploratory work of devised theatre. Contrary to traditional therapeutic models that privilege linear narrative coherence, collaborators

in devised theatre practices can harness fragmented subjectivity as a source of imaginative play. Instead, non-linear, episodic, and simultaneous stagings more accurately reflect the lived experience of affective overwhelm and can facilitate deeper exploration than linear dramaturgy. By resisting cohesive linearity, collaboratively created theatre resists the framing of performance as an endpoint and, consequently, resists a false sense of resolution.

This resistance to closure situates performance as part of an ongoing process in which personal and communal working-through continues beyond the theatrical event. Dialogic performance, both during the devising process and in post-performance discussions, extends the therapeutic and developmental impact of collaboratively created theatre. Such structured opportunities for reflection, discussion, and further creative work can support participants in integrating insights gained through the process, insight that empowers young participants to reclaim agency over their subjectivity. The research highlights the importance of genuine participant agency over creative content and process. When positioned as co-authors rather than passive interpreters of adult-devised material, adolescents are able to strengthen their sense of trust, autonomy, and self-determination. This necessitates reconsideration of adult facilitation practices in educational, theatrical, and therapeutic contexts, as reliance on a singular, codifying voice, such as a director or a playwright, undermines the comprehensive authenticity of bringing disparate adolescent perspectives into conversation with one another. These implications invite further exploration of how such practices might be sustained and adapted across diverse cultural, institutional, and therapeutic settings.

Future Directions

The research I have conducted explores the potential of devised theatrical processes to facilitate the working-through of affective overwhelm in adolescent participants, privileging continuous and multiplicitous processes while simultaneously embodying the characteristics of collaborative play over finite, product-driven conclusions. In light of the current conclusions reached in this research, the scope of this research invites several avenues for further inquiry that could deepen and expand these conclusions. I will continue to develop avenues of exploration to continue this work through practical application. Incorporation of this work into a future monograph will engender necessary longitudinal investigations in order to assess the continued fecundity of the therapeutic benefits documented in process-driven devising. While observational and analytical evidence gestures towards shifts in self-perception, emotional regulation, and creative agency during and immediately after the devising process, it remains unclear how these outcomes persist, evolve, or dissipate over months and years. Such studies could illuminate whether the theatrical laboratory's capacity to ameliorate affective overwhelm extends beyond its immediate temporal frame.

As such, future research that compares process-driven and product-driven devising models as a means of examination of their relative capacities to foster agency, resilience, and affective articulation would foster open, continued dialogue between collaborators that extends beyond the direct, theatrical work itself, as I map these longitudinal studies onto the distinct phases of collaborative creation. Given this study's observation that curatorial authority, notably when placed in the hands of adults, can diminish adolescent ownership over storied expression, empirical comparison would help clarify which structural conditions most effectively balance safety, structure, and participant-led authorship. Transversal movement across the boundaries between processes and products works toward the expansion of play-based modalities deployed

in therapeutic devising. Thus, integration of non-verbal or multimodal forms, such as immersive movement-based practices, sensory theatre, or virtual reality, may offer additional pathways for articulating inarticulatory affect, particularly for participants who resist or struggle with language-based expression.

With my continued research in this field, both theoretically and practically, further emphasis on open process over a closed product will not only remove the facilitator, myself in this case, as the foremost authority on the work, but will facilitate deterritorialized, subject-driven research. In deterritorializing therapeutic, theatrical processes, the expansion of this research will continue to draw a distinction between “meaning,” often left to the facilitator or therapist, and “meaningfulness,” as it relates directly to the individual participant. Future research will endeavor to devise qualitative measures for assessing how participants themselves define and experience meaningfulness in the devising process, and the impact it might have on the prospective futures they envision. This line of inquiry could also prompt the exploration of how devised theatre methodologies might be embedded within formal curricula or community mental health programs, particularly in under-resourced areas where access to the arts is limited.

This is exceedingly potent when perceived in conjunction with the potential cross-cultural and transnational applications of therapeutic devised theatre. Given that the principles of transversal movement across temporal, spatial, and subjective boundaries are, on some level, mediated by cultural norms around adolescence, play, and emotional expression, further comparative work in diverse social and educational contexts would evaluate the universality of these mechanisms and identify culturally specific adaptations. Ultimately, the pursuit of these future directions not only bears the capacity to refine the theoretical and practical understanding

of devised theatre as a therapeutic praxis but also strengthens its capacity to serve as a sustained, adaptive resource for adolescents navigating the complex terrain of affective overwhelm.

Constructing a Therapeutic Theatre Toolbox

Without suggesting that the practice-based, theoretical principles are exact, the creation of a toolbox from which one can pull aids designed for facilitators, artists, and therapists working collaboratively with therapeutic theatre, particularly when navigating emotionally charged or overwhelming material. Drawing on Phil Jones' nine core processes of dramatherapy and Renée Emunah's five-phase model, I have begun to construct a therapeutic theatre toolbox that offers both mechanisms of transformational techniques and a developmental arc for safely guiding participants from playful, low-risk engagement to moments of deep reflection and transformation. By incorporating theoretical concepts and examples with practical ones, the toolbox serves as a flexible guide for structuring devised processes that externalize, witness, and integrate personal and collective experiences. It advocates for creative risk-taking while prioritizing emotional safety, allowing participants to encounter complexity without the pressure of resolution, and to transform their affective "mess" into meaningful, shareable expression.

As a means of establishing a framework for safe and progressive engagement, my work towards the development of a therapeutic theatre toolbox begins with a combined application of Phil Jones' nine core processes and Renée Emunah's five-phase model. Jones' framework situates theatrical elements, such as role-taking, transformation, dramatic projection, and empathy, as key transformative methodologies for therapeutic pursuits. At the same time, Emunah's model provides a staged pathway from playful exploration to deep integration. In weaving together these disparate models, the toolbox offers both flexibility and structure through

the progressive integration of emotionally charged material. This foregrounds the safe, creative environment that is so critical prior to deeper investigations into autobiographical and relational work, arriving at moments of transformative reflection.

Contextualized within a theoretical framework that includes the principles outlined in Jones, Emunah, and Malchiodi's works, the multi-strand strategies for the externalization and integration of experience outlined in Company3's *Brainstorm Blueprint* serve to integrate alternative aesthetic material into the broader theatrical work periodically. The practical application of these strands, particularly when placed into conversation with Jones' dramatic techniques and Emunah's integrative five-phase model, can take the form of distinct lines of flight that target specific processes and phases in the process of collaborative creation. For instance, metaphor-driven activities like *How the Brain Works* or *My Brain is Like My Bedroom* invite personification and symbolic projection, providing low-risk entry points for exploring affective complexity. Relational scenes, such as *Parent Duologues* or structured non-verbal participation akin to *Brain Scan*, shift focus toward witnessing, empathy, and role-based distancing, and consequently allow participants to examine interpersonal or internal conflicts without overexposure. Higher-intensity strands, such as *Prefrontal Cortex vs. Limbic System* and *You Say to Me, I Say to You*, move into deeper emotional exploration and integration, enabling participants to reclaim and articulate their authentic truths.

As this toolbox continues to develop over time, it will serve as a guiding principle for facilitators of collaborative theatre therapy, including myself. The most effective therapeutic theatre work acknowledges that transformation does not always lead to resolution. Acceptance of affective and metaphorical "mess" creates a space where multiplicity and complexity are not only permitted but actively pursued. Theatrical, messy yet low-stakes entry points can give way

to higher-intensity relational or autobiographical expression, always supported by witnessing and reflective integration. By maintaining a balance between structure and responsiveness, the toolbox supports devised processes that are at once creatively generative and therapeutically attuned, making overwhelming material both shareable and survivable.

While this is by no means a complete and comprehensive toolbox, it serves to set the foundation for a future toolbox and digital commons created to advance therapeutic, theatrical processes. As I work towards establishing this toolbox, it is essential to keep two key principles in mind. The first principle is that progression should remain flexible as participants move back and forth between phases as they engage in different techniques. The second key principle to bear in mind is the importance of pairing emotionally intense activities with grounding and reflective moments. Ultimately, this toolbox notes the significance of honoring the “productive mess” rather than pushing for narrative closure. In centering these principles, the continued development of this toolbox will, hopefully, give rise to therapeutic processes of play that aid adolescents in working through distressing moments of affective overwhelm.

Call to Action

If collaboratively created theatre can transform affective overwhelm into agency, resilience, and collaborative renegotiation of self and reality, then it must not remain a niche practice or an afterthought in therapeutic processes. Educators, mental health practitioners, and cultural institutions have an ethical imperative to create and protect spaces where young people can safely embody their experiences, rehearse new possibilities, and author their authentic narratives without the pressure of meaning or resolution. Rather than advocating for aesthetic productions, institutions that serve adolescent populations should rest in the messy, play-based

processes that preceded and outlast them. Commitment to sustained, process-driven collaboration affirms that every adolescent voice holds the potential to reshape not just the stage but the world beyond it.

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