

## CREATING ROOM FOR THE NERVOUS SYSTEM ON ZOOM

ELIZA LADD

elizaladd.com

### Re -Evaluating Teaching Theatre - What still holds true in the pandemic?

ATHE 2021, August 6, 12:30 - 2:00 (est)

(Why is theatre necessary in Pandemic? - Community, witness, communication, connection  
(What do we learn in teaching this way? - zoom gifts, focus, closeness, empowerment  
(What still holds true in theatrical training? - witness, creativity, depth, rhythm, frame, play, body, visual / aural / physical

**Eliza:** 5 foot 7 inches, woman, in a green and white room with wood floor, Sarasota FL

Land Acknowledgement:

I acknowledge the Tocobaga and Calusa Tribes and the Manasota Culture and Safety Harbor Culture native to the land from which I am offering this presentation.

I have titled my presentation: **Creating Room For the Nervous System on Zoom**

I am going to share some of the work process and findings from *work/play/work*, an 8 week ensemble theater making workshop I held in the Fall of 2020 with 11 graduate students (outside the Conservatory).

I will share some thoughts, and then a video and then I will ask for some creative response from you.

---

‘*Call it Church, Call it Meeting, Call it Creative Process*’ - this was the prompt with which I invited participation to *work/play/work* — I, and I believe my students, were hungry for connection, engagement, relationship, theater practice and community — that which we had seemingly lost.

I specifically initiated *work/play/work*

1. in response to the confluence (of energy, events) of the Pandemic, The Uprising for Social Justice, and the Call to Action initiated by students of color at my Conservatory
2. and to provide an opportunity, over the newly potent medium of ZOOM, to explore:
  - the use of somatic practices and devising theater techniques (including *Live sound Action* with which I work) to discover intimacy and community online and,
  - to begin to inquire / practice how the subject of institutional racism and white-bodied supremacy could be addressed through creative process

**CONTEXT:** In the summer of 2020 I was doing some reading on how to be an anti-racist and I came upon the book *My Grandmother's Hands - Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem. This book asserts that Transformation (of trauma, culture, racism, people) occurs in the body and through somatic, experienced body, process

One substantial thread of my background as a teacher is in Somatic work **and** I grew up with the experience of seeing the limitations of political / intellectual action. I am not against activism, I am an activist, **and**, I resonate with the assertion of this book that transformation is located in the body, through embodiment — I have a deep belief in the body as locus of change. Once assembled, I began *work/play/work* by naming some of the context in which we were working:

- The Pandemic - loss of shared space, loss of literal physical intimacy
- Movement for Social Justice - facing systemic racism, white bodied supremacy  
there was trauma here

As an entrance into *re-imagining leadership*, (beginning with vulnerability as a principle) I acknowledged:

\**the idea of race* - and this is a quote - “race is ‘an idea created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage’” (*white fragility*)

\**definition of racism* - as a living structure, system - and this is a quote “that includes the acknowledgement that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color”

\*If you, I, embrace this idea of systemic racism, *I cannot help but say I am a racist.*

acknowledgement, vulnerability, bringing the subject up in a personal way, not to glorify self, but to bare, and then, acknowledge and allow that everyone has their own story, and then to the question - not whether I am or not a racist, but how am I seeking to interrupt it?

---

Return to idea that the locus of change is in our bodies, that what we are doing with Somatic and Creative practices is *creating room for our nervous systems* - to release and transform - in regards to the Pandemic and social justice issues

share **quotes:** (quoted in *My Grandmother's Hands*)

“*History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history*”

James Baldwin

-From this I point to the NOW, our bodies, what we are carrying / expressing

“*There is a deep wisdom within our very flesh, if we can only come to our senses and feel it.*”

Elizabeth Rehnke

-From this I point to working from our bodies, trusting the stories that we are telling with them

At this point in the workshop, we all read some of the material in *My Grandmother's Hands*, and then shifted our intention to a creative community building process - trusting that this context was underneath and informing us - and that the pathway of Play, Embodied Exchange, Creative Expression and Response - would allow us to at least approach the complex subject matter (of institutional racism and white-bodied supremacy)

## **Creating room for the nervous system on ZOOM — prompts, exercises, process**

Step 1: leader vulnerability, invite risk, reveal self, encourage community to do the same

Step 2: Getting into the body - over the computer

A.\*loss of touch - adaptation -

- work with self touch with breath (seeing breath, the body move), witnessed,
- hand on face, hand on body, witnessing again
- flock this - close up of body (torso, face) and touch

all leads to BEING SEEN, almost more than in studio, there was depth and intimate embodiment that arose, even though we were witnessing through the eyes, the screen, the focus, the closeness of view, the silence, the slowness - all contributed to a depth of intimacy and nervous system release.

B.\*working with (silence), slowness and being seen - ZOOM demanded it, and it deepens us

C.\*partnering - mirror, (slow, close up view, partial body)

D.\*larger group flock and listen physically (mirror, follow, trust, join), send physical impulse to partner across screen (trust) —

all required SLOWNESS, and MORE LISTENING and ENGAGED FOCUS

E.\*SIMPLE ACTIONS - walking, marching (carrying time) - in corridor, together,

POTENCY (also given context, what are we carrying forward? what has existed behind us? ) ZOOM demanded simplicity and focus, resulted in depth, community

---

### **Harnessing the gifts of ZOOM:**

what the limitations of the box and the distance gave us, the fuel for creativity

### **COMPOSITION**

FRAMING - owning the view, positioning the camera, what is seen and not

ENTRANCE and EXIT - timing, use of space

CLOSE UP / PARTIAL BODY / BODY PARTS - the intimacy this brings, we don't see the whole story, something potent here

JUXTAPOSITION - of different views, of sound and movement, of movement and stillness, choosing 2 boxes, 4 boxes / views

MOVEMENTS OF REPETITION - walking, marching, working with object, labour - this brings in history, habit, labour, ritual, trauma, (carrying of time, story)

STILLNESS, SILENCE, SOUND

LIGHT

SPACE / SET / MATERIAL

## HAND MADE WORK

- ownership, one body, individuals, and then together
- the history that is carried, the carrying of time, of story
- handiwork, at the individual level, each story is included
- the intimacy of this, brings us to the body, and our storytelling selves

All this work dovetailed with *Live Sound Action* , what I have named my creative process (prior to zoom) of working with objects, substances, and ordinary actions, to create epic and poetic visual, sound and movement images for theater - this form rooted in sculpture and percussion focusses on tangibility, repetition, hand made (and body scaled work) and provides a pathway between micro and macro, it helps the body reveal the deeper stories through ordinary or labour like actions

- \*the pouring of stones (simple sound and movement image)
- \*the years of life, labor, working with the earth that are in that labor

(tangibility, immersion in substance, aspects of labour, - way in to deeper story)

THE LIMITATIONS of the box are actually a gift . .

- cultivating depth, vulnerability, intimacy, empowerment of the performer and creation of community, kinship
- return of actor / performer to being a whole bodied multi-sensorial creator (set, light, framing, CHOICE)
- each artist owns the view - determines what is seen and what is not seen, she chooses space and place and materials with which to work
- creative ownership in response to simple prompts

-in a way, *taking Theater out of the Ghetto*, the Ghetto of high priced unavailable theater, theater isolated from the larger society, back into the hands of the people, the crafters, the performers

- this is a return to the original function of theater - as a transformative and processing instrument - on the individual and civic level

---

Throughout the process we worked with idea of WHEEL OF CREATIVITY

one act / response to prompt then fuels the next prompt or creative expression, or the players respond creatively, with words, or next creative moment - this kept the 'topic' in the body, in the moment, in the creative play rather than moving to analysis or 'intellect' - and this created community, permission, and space for the nervous system.

WITNESS and CREATIVE EXPRESSION - creates ROOM FOR NERVOUS SYSTEM, possibility for transformation, and community

(and of course there is a time for talking, analyzing, reflecting - and that is some of what this presentation is)

---

CONTINUE the WHEEL OF CREATIVITY now:

out of our recordings, one of my students, Alex Rodriguez and I made a VIDEO (for his Independent Study on *work/play/work*), and the video is another step, very different than the original work, bringing in a lot of technology, something made out of our recordings of our original work

After viewing this 6 minute video, I will invite any who want to to share 3 words / images / sound and movement seeds as a creative response to this material - what you saw and heard - in this presentation and also in the video

VIEW VIDEO

moment to craft

Turn camera on and as a popcorn sharing, or, I will voice an order from how I see my screen (and if any want to share who's camera not on, send message in chat?) and then we will proceed through that order . . .

WE BEGIN . . . share . . . we end.

\*Now we will open this forum up more broadly for questions / responses / thoughts for any of the three of us . . .