The Butterfly Catcher

Dr. Kathryn Ricketts

Legacies of Learning in Curriculum Studies: Gifts, Grace, and Gratitude

Intermingling Souls

In the Fall of 1981, I was propelled off Simon Fraser University's main stage with excitement and relief, confident that I would be a performer for life! I had never felt such crystallized intensity and knew that this experience would have long lasting resonations. Despite the deeply poetic implications of the piece I had just performed, they were left in the wake of my own narcissistic effervescence. The fact that we were dancing an immigrant's story of arrival and departure, of place and displacement, of identity and heritage, ancestry and roots, seemed to pass me by. Elitist narcissism obsessed with physical virtuosity is often the location of a dancer and I am troubled to admit, I was not exempt from this. For many years with varying degrees of authenticity and depth, this was my world of dance until…an important interruption.

I arrived at a dance studio in Copenhagen at the age of 28 to meet my long-standing friend, soon to forge through a very difficult journey that forever shaped my directions as an artist, scholar and educator. His exotic Columbian imagination soon found a complement in my seemingly unusual ways of seeing the world and we began to collaborate ALL the time. Portable cassette player under arm, we imposed our kinaesthetic machinations on the general public anywhere, anytime! We built a repertoire of performances for just the two of us and large groups, both in theatres, rough studios, back allies, on busy streets and rooftops.

Now I was called to be at his side during his last years suffering from AIDS. He was one of the first generations to die of AIDS with only rudimentary drugs in place to prolong the imminent outcome. I was there as an extension of his body, a conduit for his wild imagination and an amplifier to his

dancers who eagerly awaited the completion of a show he had already started before becoming very ill.

We undoubtedly had intermingling souls and thus his expressions and invitations to movement were easily caught by me like a delicate net catching exotic butterflies. I transformed these 'butterflies' into movement, which in turn were interpreted and transformed yet again by the dancers who were eagerly poised before me.

For 18 months of my life, I became the creative and kinaesthetic channel for my friend with AIDS. While he was dying, I was living fervently, double time, and in doing this my world of dance radically shifted as my body became purely the access point for him. I had been present for my first dying process and recognized the terrible beauty in this journey, potent with creativity and combined with an almost acidic lucidity. The vitality in this crisis where imagination lacked the compliment of a body; using another body as a vehicle for his voice, was profoundly transformational. This radically shifted my position as dancer/artist to a focus of uncovering stories of others through movement and allowing this in turn to be a catalyst for shared empathy within a community.

Lynn Fels (1998) helped me to define this method I was exploring, as performative inquiry as she so eloquently describes: "Transported into an unexpected environment, the student must re-examine the familiar against the unfamiliar, and through the resulting disequilibrium recover a new balance of meeting oneself within a new environment" (p.12).
What follows are memories of the poignant moments in my work with my dear friend and how they have shaped me as a scholar, performer and teacher today in relation to Curriculum Development and Performance Studies.

I owned the door!

I had lived half of my day by the time he arose from his long and meandering night of sleep and sleeplessness. Cigarettes extinguished in half empty yogurt containers and random selections of pages torn from stacks of *all* the books rifled through in desperate search for distraction.

I had cycled, ran, made art, visited the local Danish bakery and was waiting for his emergence from the darkened bedroom of the grand villa where we lived together. Then there was the silent slow immersion into the day where I needed to be present but somewhat invisible. The visitors would be arriving soon at our front door of which *I* owned. It was I that mitigated the constant parade of gem holders, feather wavers and ointment spreaders. All in good will to 'heal' my friend who was minding his own business and dying of AIDS.

For this performative task I understood the costuming was paramount. Black leather jacket (even on the hottest days) blood red lipstick and bleached blonde spikey short hair. I was the "bitch from Canada" who efficiently kept this man from the *possibility of miracles*. The shell I built protected the soft parts only reserved for him. This performative necessity has informed how I navigate the balance between agency and humility, especially within the complexity of the academy.

The monkeys asked, I answered

He would be waiting from his bed when I returned excited and overheated from dance rehearsal. My job was to finish the show he had started, to elongate his brilliant choreographic voice, his surreal Columbian imagination, across town to a large studio with 5 dancers who waited eagerly to be shown the next move towards *his* ingenuity. His collection of stuffed monkeys, his elected and primary representatives, Pufi and Rocco, were in the lead and all would be lined up on the bed and

waiting with bated breath to hear about the day's rehearsal,.. and who said what?, and how did she take that? and how many cigarettes did they smoke on break? etc.

The monkeys asked, I answered and the dying man smiled and nodded with great satisfaction. At times we got so excited we would make rap songs about the challenges of the rehearsal on a tiny Fisher Price speaker and microphone system. Then it was my turn to ask the monkeys how *their* day was. There were reports on fevers and diarrhea, rashes and coughs. And sometimes they would reveal a most miniscule fear that would slip out of the corner of their furry mouths.

Insert Image # 1 here
Jorge and Pafi
Photo and collage by Jorge Holguin
Copenhagen, Denmark
1985

This line up of plush translators and the ridiculous amplification of the Fisher Price speaker system taught me how to navigate the complexity of voices that need to be heard through the most unexpected means. Voices that hide under beds and in closets and need to be coaxed out in ways I had never imagined. Marjorie Seigal (1995) talks about transmediation and the necessary transfer from one medium of information to another and the syntax that occurs affording a generative and innovative meaning making. Dorothy Heathcote (1984) referred to

> "…the principle of 'ostranenie' defined by Viktor Shklovsky as being 'that of making strange'. We very readily cease to 'see' the world we live in and become anaesthetized to its distinctive features. The arts permit us 'to reverse that process and to creatively deform the usual, the normal, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us'. (p. 127)

Blood Transfusions

Every week had its own rhythm
We were tightly tethered to hemoglobin counts
The transfusions were regular and frequent
and dictated the energy, the possibilities for outings.

The question was "Could he come to rehearsal that day?"

The answer was “Yes for two days after the infusion.”

Sitting up against the mirror of the dance studio wrapped in a blanket
Me, listening to the carefully chosen words cloaked in tone and nuance of expression
Tumbling through my body to the dancers
Speaking back in a dialogue 3 times removed
This is how we made the dance of his life.

> “…These are all demanding activities, requiring the use of perception, imagination, speculation, and interpretation, as well as exercising dramatic, cognitive, and social capacities. These capacities and the energies of the group are focused on the development of a specific dramatic world arising from a particular pre-text that defines the parameters of this world.”
> (O’Neil, 1982, p.1)

My Theory of BIGNESS – Ordinary Meets Extraordinary

I complained of his style, (we still argued regularly; it somehow kept us grounded), “Your style is so BIG it is like having cheese sandwich with cheese”. He challenged my viewpoint “Prove to me your theory of Bigness against smallness”. On the program with his finished piece I submitted a very small piece call *Lester.* A very tall man sits on a very small wooden chair in his bathrobe. He is eating a bowl of cereal perfectly timed to the musical accompaniment of Pomp and Circumstance. Every crescendo is met with either an unenthusiastic spoonful of soggy cereal or an irritated wiggle and checking of the seat of the chair.

The final crescendo results in Lester pulling a hammer out of his bathrobe pocket and the tentative taps at a nail that has been disturbing his morning meal. Two slides go up on the screen behind Lester to complete the piece. The first slide gives the definition of ordinary as uninteresting or commonplace. The second slide asks True or False?

We seemed to find the extraordinary gift of life every day in the small daily rituals together in his last year. I learned to continue this throughout my life, to think of the soggy cereal and the little nail and the hammer in the pocket, all within the grandeur of our living moment to moment. These

moments are fleeting and work *through* the form we present like an express train as Fels (1998) stated “The edge of chaos is the balancing point between order and chaos…”(p. 257)

Insert Image # 2 here
“Lester”
Photographer – Jens Hemmel
Dancer – Christian Holland
Copenhagen, Denmark
1988

The Final Field Trip

The monkeys had their big outing on a summer day 1989. The lineup was moved from the bed to the inside of the coffin huddled up against Jorge protectively. They were silent but fierce and I knew all the stories and secrets they held and smiled down on them as I passed by towards the pew. I kept my eye on my new shoes throughout the service hoping that they may save my grief from rattling around the floors and banging at the windows.

Outside in the shade I stood awaiting the transfer from the church to the hearse, around the corner came 6 strong men struggling with their task but not from the weight, nor the narrow passage but from the lineup of furry creatures, Rocco and Pafi in the lead, precariously balanced in a row on the lid of the coffin. If it wasn’t for my heart breaking in two I would have doubled over with glee as I watched the parade of creatured ambassadors teeter and rock as they clung to the lid through the difficult journey into the hearse. The somber black vehicle moved very, very slowly and I did not envy the poor driver, sweat on his brow as he kept his eyes glued on the rear-view mirror and his precarious guests.

Rocco and Pafi are with me now and make their appearances diligently and loyally in every class I teach as they tell their story of giving Jorge his voice in the last year of his life. Sometimes we need monkeys….

As enormously difficult as this was, heart wrenching really, it was a gift I will cherish forever as Jorge taught me how to access my dancing body as a butterfly net for the stories of others and the stories that need to be told but are silenced or muffled.

Certeau (as cited in Conquergood, 2002, p. 145) wrote that "what the map cuts up, the story cuts across," by looking at different domains of knowledge and how these domains, the story and the dance, the theory and the practice, can create tensions of understanding. Conquergood in his quote of Certeau writes of this tension as what sits at the heart of Performance Studies

> "…transgressive travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract—"the map"; the other one practical, embodied, and popular—"the story." This promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research. Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin of the binary opposition between theory and practice.
> (Conquergood, 2002, p.145)

This form of abstraction helps to transport the story from specifics (i.e. character, setting, context) to personal and then to a shared platform with others inviting personal lived experiences to emerge as invitations to creative participatory and collective meaning making. "Most significantly, these activities illuminate the processes by which human beings experience a sense of personal identity and, importantly, how these experiences are necessarily organized by remembered, currently lived, and imagined identifications and relationships." (Sumara, 2001, p. 168)

Heathcote (1984) wrote about drama as the construction of and the invitation to "another room" (p. 129). This room allows for the possibility of dissolving the practicalities and pragmatics of time, space and consequence and for the merging of performer and spectator. Heathcote (1984) describes this as a "no-penalty" zone (p. 129) and this space allows us to actually see the world opposed to merely recognizing it.

Insert Image # 3 here
"In the Midst"
Photograher – Kim Ernest
Dancers – Kathryn Ricketts, Jorge Holguin
Copenhagen, Denmark

This experience with Jorge was directly tethered to subsequent graduate work where I fell into a community of arts-based scholars who enabled an articulation in sound theories and practices. I studied with vibrant scholars from University of British Columbia where I could steep my curiosities in A/r/tography (Irwin, Springgay, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008), Performative Inquiry (Fels, 1998) and then later at Simon Fraser University where I worked within embodied ways of knowing (Snowber, 2007) and phenomenology (Smith, 2017). With this kaleidoscopic journey of mentored scholarship, I was able to define a method that I coin as Embodied Poetic Narrative. This trilogy allows narratives, objects of meaning and bodily expression to co-mingle and allow voice to be shared and heard within a co-constructed community. I was able to take this forward with my passion to resuscitate voice within disenfranchised communities such as I did with Jorge in the studio long ago.

To this end I am currently working as the Director of Innovative Educative Practices and Field Experience in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. In this role I try to mend, fortify and enliven the relationships between our education intern students, teachers in the field and our faculty advisors who support their internships. This facilitation may seem far away from the butterfly net in the studio in Copenhagen but I see the dancer diligently and carefully catching the stories and expressions that need to be caught, heard and appreciated.

I will always be grateful for the gift of this opportunity with my dear friend Jorge who taught me how to catch butterflies and for the scholars both of UBC and SFU Faculties of Education who polished and refined this gift until it could refract and reflect with power and impact for the rest of my time as a performing, facilitating and educating scholar.

References

Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review, 46*(2), 145-156.

Fels, L. (1998). *In the wind clothes dance on a line performative inquiry: A (re)search methodology* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Heathcote, D. (1984). *Drama in the curriculum: Material for significance.* Evansten, IL: Northwestern University Press.

O'Neil, C., & A. Lambert. (1982). *Drama structure: A practical handbook for teachers*. London, UK: Hutchinson Education.

Siegel, M. (1995). More than words: The power of transmediation for learning. *Canadian Journal of Education, Toronto, 20*(4) 455 - 475.

Smith, S. J. (2017). The vitality of humanimality: From the perspective of life phenomenology, *Phenomenology & Practice,* 11 (1), 72-88.

Snowber, C. (2007). The soul moves: Dance and spirituality in educative practice. In L. Bresler (Ed.), *International handbook for research in the arts and education* (pp. 1449-1458). Dordrecht, Germany: Springer.

Springgay, S., Irwin, R. L., Leggo, C., & Gouzouasis, P. (Eds.). (2008). *Being with A/r/tography*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Sumara, D. J. (2001). Learning to create insight: Literary engagements as purposeful pedagogy. *Changing English, 8*(2) 165-175