Re-Enter Backwards: form and function in theatre for survivors of sexual violence

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

While the use of theatre as a tool of advocacy for survivors of sexual violence is not a new concept, defining a sub-genre of theatre by these terms has not yet been done. It is important to mark a distinction between advocacy theatre and drama that includes themes of sexual violence. Advocacy theatre clearly states advocacy as a central goal of its efforts. There must also be a distinction between advocacy theatre and other forms of social theatre in order to better serve survivors by recognizing the contributions to this field and encouraging future growth. This thesis outlines observable trends in the form and function of advocacy theatre using examples across a diverse spectrum of performance including one-woman shows, community-created work, theatre for incarcerated women, women’s circus, docudrama, interactive theatre, and ensemble-driven drama. It also presents a case study of advocacy theatre, Breaking the Current by Jeanine Thompson (U.S.A, 1999). This thesis uses qualitative information, along with play reviews, interviews, film footage, production stills, thick description, and textual analysis to explore form and function in advocacy theatre, and acknowledges that it is difficult to evaluate the success of advocacy theatre due to a lack of quantifiable data.
Dedication

Dedicated to the survivors in my life.
Thank you to my advisor Dr. Beth Kattelman for her wonderful encouragement and guidance.

Thank you to Dr. Jennifer Schlueter for serving on my committee.

Thank you to the Ohio State Department of Theatre for their support of my research.

Thank you to Jeanine Thompson for kindly allowing me to include *Breaking the Current* in this thesis, as well as for her willingness to share her story and her art with me.

Thank you to Lucinda Bray from Empowerment Theatre Company.

Love and thanks to my parents, Janet and Eric, and to my husband, Kyle Wellman.
Vita

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Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... ii
Dedication ....................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................... iv
Vita ............................................................................................................................... v
Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
Chapter 2: Form and Function in Advocacy Theatre ..................................................... 12
Chapter 3: Form and Function in Jeanine Thompson’s Breaking the Current .......... 40
Chapter 4: Challenges in Analysis ............................................................................... 54
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 57
Appendix A: Interview I with Jeanine Thompson ......................................................... 65
Appendix B: Interview II with Jeanine Thompson ......................................................... 76
Appendix C: Interview III with Jeanine Thompson ....................................................... 82
Chapter 1: Introduction

As the lights come up, we hear carnival music. A polite voice is heard through the speaker: “Please step forward, two to a car. Make sure your seatbelts are securely fastened. Lower the bar on to your laps, until you hear a click. Keep your hands and feet inside the car at all times.”\footnote{Thompson, Jeanine. “Breaking the Current.” Unpublished draft, 24 Mar. 1999. 1. Print.} A performer comes crashing through the painted mouth of a toad and down a ramp onto the stage. She is riding a red wagon and as she pulls it suddenly to a stop, she leaps out to address the audience. She is dressed almost cartoonishly with short pants, high socks, t-shirt, and enormous driving goggles atop her head. She smiles at us immediately. “Tonight,” she tells us, “This ride will begin with a story.”\footnote{Breaking the Current. By Jeanine Thompson. Dir. Sue Ott Rowlands. Perf. Jeanine Thompson. Columbus: The Ohio State University Department of Theatre, 1999. DVD.} This woman will go on to relay that story of child grown to adulthood, a story that stops and starts, a story that skips thematically through a series of life events particularly punctuated by child abuse and a sexual assault. It is a story that reveals as much about the nature of survival as it does about the survivor who tells it. While the play addresses sexual violence, trauma, and abuse, it is not simply a play about these things. It is a play about the recovery process, the coping mechanisms of survival, and the development of those mechanisms.

The piece in the previous paragraph could be categorized in any number of ways. It is a one-woman show. It is a primarily autobiographical play drawn from much of the performer’s own experiences. It is a contemporary feminist text. And in the context of
this document, it is also a good example of theatre for survivors of sexual violence or, as I will call it, advocacy theatre.

Why is it necessary to create this category? Many of the plays that I will discuss as advocacy theatre have been examined as successful examples of other genres. But to explore these works distinctly as forms of advocacy theatre is important for two reasons. First, advocacy theatre serves a significant population (survivors of sexual violence). Second, no one has written specifically about advocacy theatre as its own sub-genre of applied drama.

To address the first issue, I am turning to statistical data on sexual violence. The sheer numbers of reported sexual violence are staggering. Statistically, one in six women and one in thirty-three men will experience an attempted or completed sexual assault in their lifetime.\(^3\) It is estimated that, in the United States alone, someone is sexually assaulted every two minutes. These numbers do not account for other sexual violence including harassment, stalking, lewd behavior, and other forms of sexual misconduct not specifically included in the legal definition of sexual assault. They cannot account for sexual violence that occurs in countries where reporting the crime is not a readily available option. They do not account for the other 66% of sexual assaults which go unreported. These figures also do not account for more specific populations where the risk for sexual violence is much greater. At-risk communities include people with disabilities, senior adults, children, GLBTQI, racial minority groups, and college-age women. There

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are many reasons why members of these populations face a greater threat of sexual violence. Many of these groups have faced discrimination and disenfranchisement in the past, they have a higher instance of vulnerability. Some populations are more naturally vulnerable due to physical or mental impairment or age. Some groups are more likely to be located in environments in which violence is more prevalent and/or more likely to go unreported. Sexual predators look for vulnerability in any area with a potential to be exploited. Certain populations are less likely to be believed if they report sexual violence; this is especially true for children and people with cognitive disabilities or for groups that have found law enforcement reluctant or prejudicial in past instances. Physical vulnerability (or the appearance of it) is also likely to be exploited by a perpetrator; not only can this affect children, senior adults, and people with disabilities, but it also applies to people who have experienced alcohol or drug-facilitated assaults.4 Sexual violence remains a serious problem throughout the world and its survivors walk among us daily.

Sexual violence is not a new topic in dramatic literature. We can trace its roots as far back as we can trace theatre. The Greeks encountered it often in their tragedies such as The Trojan Women, The Suppliant Maidens, Hecuba, and Helen.5 There are hundreds, if not thousands, of examples of plays that include rape or sexual abuse as a plot device or theme. Contemporary theatre is rife with themes of sexual violence.6 Advocacy theatre, however, is a relatively new sub-genre within the theatre, certainly within the last

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4 Sexual Assault Response Network of Central Ohio (SARNCO); "Statistics | RAINN | Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network."
5 See Euripides, 6th Century B.C.E.
6 See Some Girls by Neil Labute (United States, 2006), Frozen by Bryony Lavery (Great Britain, 1998), Blackbird by David Harrower (Scotland, 2005), Doubt by John Patrick Shanley (United States, 2004), Blasted by Sarah Kane (Great Britain, 1995), Extremities by William Mastroscione (United States, 1982), The Widow's Blind Date by Israel Horowitz (United States, 1989), How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel (United States, 1997), Cloud 9 by Caryl Churchill (Great Britain, 1978), for examples of sexual violence in contemporary dramatic literature.
forty years, and has not yet been codified, systematized, or clearly critiqued as a genre. In this thesis, I will focus on advocacy theatre for survivors of sexual assault.

Definitions

In order to talk about advocacy theatre, we must first define it. When I use the term *advocacy theatre* in this thesis, I am specifically referring to advocacy theatre for survivors of sexual violence while there are other marginalized groups that utilize drama for advocacy purposes; they are beyond the scope of this document, although some overlap in research occasionally occurs. And while many plays explore the theme of sexual violence, not all plays that have sexual violence in them are advocacy theatre. The companies and productions included in this research only extend to groups who claim advocacy as a primary goal of their work. Additionally, some productions included in this research are examples of advocacy theatre, but must not be assumed to be successful in their goal by inclusion alone.

The other term I will use in this thesis is *survivors’ theatre*. This is a term I have coined specifically to talk about a sub-genre of *advocacy theatre*. It refers to theatre written by, performed by, and/or viewed by survivors for purposes of advocacy. While *advocacy theatre* can be devised, performed, and viewed by anyone, *survivors’ theatre* must have a direct connection to a survivor of sexual violence. All *survivors’ theatre* is *advocacy theatre* but not all *advocacy theatre* is *survivors’ theatre*.

The word *advocacy* means to plead a cause or to speak on behalf of someone or something else. In this thesis, advocacy will refer specifically to pleading the cause of prevention and awareness of, education about, and/or social change surrounding the
issues of sexual violence. It will also refer directly to giving survivors of sexual violence a voice.

_Sexual violence_ refers to any instance in which sex is utilized as a weapon against someone else, either male or female. While _victim_ is a common term for people who have experienced violence, most advocacy and social justice groups prefer the term _survivor_, as its connotations are more empowering for people affected by sexual violence. When I use the term _survivor_, I am referring directly to anyone who identifies as someone who has been sexually assaulted, abused, molested, harassed, or otherwise violated.

_Social theatre_ is a broad term that I have opted to borrow James Thompson’s and Richard Schechner’s term from their _Drama Review_ essay, ‘Why “Social Theatre”?’. _Social theatre_, which refers to theatre with a practical, pedagogical or social application as its primary goal. It has also been called “applied theatre (UK and Australia), community-based theatre (USA), theatre for development (certain Asian and African countries), or popular theatre (Canada).” In her comparative essay on dramatherapy and social theatre, Anne Seymour chooses to do the same, although she admits the problems inherent in choosing one term to represent a great number of different movements within

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7 The pronoun _she_ will be used throughout the text as the universal third-person singular but is not meant to, in any way, imply that all survivors are female. Recent statistics show that 1 in 6 men are victims of sexual violence. The stigma associated with sexual violence is uniquely difficult for male survivors who are often taught that being assaulted or abused is a sign of weakness and lack of masculinity. It is interesting to note that next to none of the productions examined in this research involve male survivors. This is not intentional. Almost no information on male survivors using advocacy theatre was discovered in the course of my research. This is not to say that it does not exist but merely to point out another example of a lack of resources for male survivors in recovery.

The term trigger or triggering is a term espoused by professionals in mental and behavioral health fields, as well as by some victims’ rights advocacy groups. Stemming from work with trauma survivors and patients diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a trigger is anything that causes a survivor to recall traumatic events. Triggers can be sensory (sounds, smells, textures, images, and sensations associated with prior trauma) or experiential (revisiting a place from the past or having a conversation that brings up painful memories). In therapy, trauma survivors are often encouraged to focus on ways of managing their personal triggers. As a gender-neutral term, monodrama will be used as the common term for a solo performer show.

Methodology

A thesis on advocacy theatre for survivors of sexual assault cannot be evaluated strictly according to quantifiable measures since advocacy itself is not a strictly quantifiable goal. And if it could be judged solely from quantifiable data, the statistics needed for such a study do not exist in a range broad enough to adequately measure a clearly quantified advocacy. Instead, in order to talk about this specific application of social theatre, that is, theatre for sexual violence survivors, I must rely on a great deal of textual analysis, as well as performance footage, thick description, reviews, interviews, and anecdotal evidence in order to construct my argument.

9 “For the purpose of economy in this chapter therefore, I will do the same, using ‘social theatre’ as the portmanteau term to cover this broad range of theatre. At the same time I acknowledge a discomfort with this, being aware of the proud history of community theatre, theatre in education and the like. Each is linked by parallel histories but each has its own distinctive story.” Seymour, Anna. "Dramatherapy and Social Theatre: A Question of Boundaries." Ed. Sue Jennings. Dramatherapy and Social Theatre Necessary Dialogues. London, UK: Routledge, 2009. 28. Print.
What follows in the second chapter of this thesis are a series of observations about trends in advocacy theatre which deals specifically with sexual violence. These trends are divided into two categories, that of form and function. For me, trends, commonalities, and patterns help to form a characterization for a field that is under-explored and under-researched. I am interested in these trends and why they exist. I am interested in their role in accomplishing advocacy.

Chapter Three contains a case study of advocacy theatre - *Breaking the Current*, a monodrama devised and performed by theatre artist and educator Jeanine Thompson. In it, I compare *Breaking the Current* (U.S.A., 1998) to the trends defined in the previous section and explore their effectiveness as a means of advocacy for survivors of sexual violence. Using script drafts, reviews, production stills and footage, and first-hand interviews with Jeanine Thompson, I have included a detailed analysis of the play as advocacy in text and performance.

In terms of play selection, it is important to note that, due mainly to accessibility, I am choosing to only examine works from English-speaking countries or works that have been translated into English and performed in English-speaking countries. All included works are contemporary (earliest written 1978). I have made an effort to acknowledge work across socio-economic and racial divides because an awareness of the discrepancies among more and less privileged populations navigating similar issues is important. However, I recognize the difficulty of achieving a sufficiently diverse sample of theatrical works due to the inherent privilege of some artists over others in terms of education, race and ethnicity, financial viability, and public exposure.
Survey of the Field

Within the study of theatre as a tool for survivors of sexual assault, there seem to be at least three distinct forms – dramatherapy, interactive/educational drama and advocacy theatre. My focus is on the third form. The idea of theatre for survivors of sexual assault initially seems to imply therapy. Seymour works to make a clear distinction between dramatherapy and social theatre:

The place where the therapy is to take place is ‘set aside’ and the dramatherapist does all within their power to make sure that work cannot be overheard or seen from outside…. Dramatherapy uses drama at the service of the client rather than expecting the client to serve the needs of the drama, though paradoxically it is through attention to the creation of the drama that the client becomes engaged in their own therapeutic process. An intimate space is created.¹⁰

One of the key differences between the two seems focused on the ultimate purpose for which each is designed. Dramatherapy is an intensely private, personal experience while social theatre is ultimately destined for an audience.

Certainly, advocacy or survivors’ theatre has therapeutic elements. One of its primary purposes is to promote recovery and healing for survivors, in addition to advocating for the prevention of and awareness about sexual violence. Many survivors who participate in survivors’ theatre talk about the healing they felt in performing or witnessing their own story or the story of another survivor. The distinction is in the performative aspect of advocacy theatre. While dramatherapy is not meant for public performance, advocacy theatre is.

¹⁰ Seymour 31.
The second form most commonly found in my research is interactive theatre. Based on Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* techniques (published 1979), this format uses images, improvisation, and audience participation and dialogue to engage the audience in an exploration of a social issue, in this case, sexual violence. Many groups do this kind of work, including Stop-Gap Theatre, Imagination Theatre, and Catharsis Productions which produces the nationally known *Sex Signals* (U.S.A, 2000), an interactive play about consent, dating violence, and sexual assault specifically targeting college-age demographics.11 A company from Boston, Deana’s Educational Theater, performed two interactive pieces, *Remote Control* (U.S.A, 2008) and *The Yellow Dress* (U.S.A., 2008), for members of the United States Air Force and the Royal Air Force in Great Britain, both of which focused on prevention and aftermath of sexual violence.12

The other highly popular use of this theatrical form is at the university level where many theatre departments and campus wellness centers have employed it. Interactive theatre focuses on choices, issues of consent, substance abuse in connection with sexual violence, and cultivating healthy relationships. In K-12 schools, it is also used to help educate children about personal safety. In some ways, these applications of interactive theatre do seem to cross over into the realm of advocacy theatre. I have chosen to categorize them separately because of their specific focus and need for audience interaction but I am aware of the potential overlap in function. While interactive theatre

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tends to focus its efforts on prevention, advocacy theatre is more often concerned with intervention.

In advocacy theatre, the focus is on healing, empowerment, and social change as a result of drama which expresses both the traumatic experience of sexual violence and the consequences and results of that trauma. Survivors’ theatre tends to focus on the experiences of survivors, often telling them in first-person narrative form, episodically, and in the past tense. In general, survivors’ theatre performs one or more of the following functions in some way – therapy, education and awareness, witnessing, and a call to action.13

Challenges in Evaluation

The efficacy of advocacy theatre is difficult to evaluate without quantitative information. Very little research has been published in this area and the results and statistics available are uneven and non-comparable due to small samples and inconsistent surveying. The majority of research done in this area tends to focus on interactive theatre as opposed to advocacy theatre. A recent study on Augusto Boal techniques used as sexual assault prevention yielded results that indicate that interactive theatre techniques were potentially more useful in educating and empowering the audience to assist survivors of sexual assault when compared with that same audience attending a lecture on the same subject material.14 Therefore, any evaluation of effectiveness in this thesis is based on qualitative information – documented audience response, production reviews, critical analysis from

13 For specific definitions and examples of these four concepts: therapy, education and awareness, witnessing, and a call to action, see Chapter Two.
other scholars and artists, performance texts and production records. I can offer some anecdotal evidence that suggests positive and/or negative response to a production, as well as the opinions of other researchers and theorists. This challenge in measurement is important to note. It certainly points to a need for additional research and quantitative analysis in order to help future artists and scholars more effectively evaluate advocacy theatre.

Additionally, several of the productions and companies I reference have not published their performance texts. In these instances, I have relied on written description from reviews, audience accounts, interviews, as well as on limited performance footage and production stills. While this has created a challenge in terms of adequately examining texts for specific trends in form and function, it also speaks to the importance of this research since so little has been published by or about these companies.

**Importance**

Despite the challenges that this research presents in terms of measurement, advocacy theatre is an important development in applied drama. Very little formal research exists in this area. As someone who is committed to theatre as a means of social change, I find advocacy theatre to be an exciting and unexplored field, not only for survivors of sexual violence, but with many practical applications reaching into other areas of social justice and advocacy. I believe it is important to the field of social theatre to continue to study advocacy theatre as its own unique application of social theatre.
Chapter 2: Form and Function in Advocacy Theatre

Form

Recognizing the role of form in structuring drama is essential to our understanding of its function as advocacy. Form communicates to the audience on a subconscious level that, in some ways, is more powerful even than the words that are spoken because we are not always aware of its impact. Form tells the spectator who the object and the subject are. It communicates a power differential and expresses the unspoken beliefs of the playwright about that differential. Form serves to emphasize important elements of a story and it gives us a lens through which to view the dramatic world. We are guided by it and we are impacted by it. In this chapter, I will examine three aspects of form that are especially crucial in advocacy theatre: plot structure, tense, and perspective.

Plot Structure

sounds, gestures, and effects that disorient or interrupt climax (Breaking the Current, U.S.A., 1998. For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf, U.S.A., 1975.) Episodic plot structure is a significant characteristic in many examples of sexual assault advocacy theatre.

Some feminist theorists have historically claimed the episodic plot structure as more indicative of the female experience. Sue Ellen Case writes:

The term that emerges in many articles concerning a new, feminine morphology is ‘contiguity.’ […] It can be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete. This contiguity exists within the text and at its borders: the feminine form seems to be without a sense of formal closure – in fact, it operates as an anti-closure. […] Without closure, the sense of beginning, middle and end, or a central focus, it abandons the hierarchical organizing-principles of traditional form that served to elide women from discourse.15

Since the 1970s, feminist theatre practitioners have adopted the episodic structure for many performance texts in an effort to subvert traditionally oppressive spaces and texts.

It is easy to find examples of the characteristic in the sexual assault advocacy canon. There is certainly something to be said for the potency of plot structure in advocacy theatre. While more traditional climactic plot structure tends to focus on a more cohesive plot line, fewer characters, and one large climax towards the end of a performance text, episodic structure has the advantage of being able to jump thematically, rather than chronologically or geographically. Episodic structure can move between characters and events without necessarily needing to connect them.

Additionally, skips and jumps to halt over-identification with survivors’ stories can help prevent triggering audience members who may have had similar experiences and can re-enforce the notion of the survivor’s control in the theatrical moment as opposed to the lack of control felt during a sexual assault.

**Tense**

The tense of the story-telling is also important in survivor’s theatre. Many of the texts I researched refer to instances of sexual violence in the past tense. This may be part of a reflective quality that allows survivors to use theatre as a way of sharing their experiences in a safe, meaningful way. Survivor’s theatre often focuses on what has happened in the past and how it affects survivors in the present. In *A Shot Away* (U.S.A., 2011), for instance, actors tell us the stories of seven U.S. soldiers who survived sexual assault while in the military. These stories were taken directly from four years of interviews conducted by the playwright, Donna Fiumano-Farley. The play premiered in New York in April 2011, in a partnership between Red Fern Theatre Company and The Military Rape Crisis Center. The focus of this story-telling is on the long-term consequences of sexual violence as these women and men struggle to heal.16 While some advocacy theatre utilizes “the flash-back,” causing the character to relive a trauma, this is either a temporary state or it is still referred as a past event, rather than

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something occurring in the present moment. For survivors, a purposeful focus on the present and the future may be more empowering than simply reliving the event of sexual assault on the stage. It also makes sense that survivors, as subjects of the action, might choose to use past tense to communicate trauma to an audience. Jeanine Thompson, whose own work touches repeatedly on these themes, might call it, “survivor speak,” by which she means a kind of dissociative way of speaking that allows emotional safety for the story-teller.¹⁷ The possibility of emotional distance created by tense can better allow someone impacted by a traumatic event to share their story without becoming emotionally drained. Expression in the past tense helps to create a sense of distance and safety.

**Perspective**


¹⁷ See Chapter 3 for more on Jeanine Thompson and “survivor speak.”
between third-person scenes. Presenting texts in third-person is rare in advocacy theatre. However, I did find an example of its use in the drama, *Games in the Backyard* (Israel, 1993). This play is especially important to note because the playwright intended it to be used as advocacy theatre and it has been seen by upwards of a million people, including thousands of students, in Israel and parts of Europe and the United States.\(^\text{18}\) It is considered by its proponents a successful example of how theatre can prevent rape. Especially interesting, it is one of the few plays in its field that has some well-documented audience response and statistical analysis that helps to determine its efficacy. And it is not unproblematic.

**Problematic Form in *Games in the Backyard***

Primarily touted as an educational play about rape, Israeli playwright Edna Mazya’s *Games in the Backyard* (sometimes translated as *Backyard Games*), utilizes a traditional climactic structure, although the play does flash backwards and forwards in time between the sexual assault and the legal trial. Scholar Dan Urian calls its structure a “sequence of segments,” similar to television.\(^\text{19}\) In his critical analysis of the play, he notes that this flashing back and forth in time actually helps to hold the audience’s interest: “Everything is directed at convincing him/her to ‘stay with us’ and not flick over to the competition channel.” Based on the highly publicized 1988 gang rape of a fourteen-year-old girl in Israel, *Games in the Backyard* moves back and forth between the


present-day courtroom and the memories of the sexual assault. The actress who plays the rape survivor, Dvori, also portrays the prosecuting attorney, while the four rapists also play the defense attorneys. At first, this double-casting seems to empower Dvori as she is able to directly accuse her attackers. But when, in the climax of the play, Dvori/the prosecutor is attacked verbally by the defense/rapists and the scene shifts and takes us back to the actual rape, her power is literally stripped from her.

John Fiske calls *Games in the Backyard* a “masculine” text and referring to the positioning of the rape scene as the climactic moment in the play, writes: “The word "climax" is significant for it has both a sexual and a narrative application.... this is no coincidence ... that the emphasis on the climax and resolution in masculine narrative parallels the importance given to the climax in masculine sexuality.” Edna Mazya herself, referring to her style as a playwright, says, “I think that I have a masculine outlook.” Anat Gesser-Edelsburg’s critique of the play’s rape scene includes the following:

Building the story towards the peak moment of the rape is also done with games of the heat and cold of the lighting …The hot lighting on the playground indicates the heated atmosphere, the intoxication, the fainting feeling preceding the loss of control in the rape scene….the blindfolded Dvori stands in the middle of the stage and tells the boys a story oozing with sexuality, at the end of which she takes her

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bra off for Asaf, who represents the narcissistic male figure. Thereby she realises
the spectator’s voyeuristic desire, which reaches its climax in the rape scene.²²

Unlike most other advocacy theatre texts, *Games in the Backyard* depicts rape
occurring *in the moment*. The re-enactment of the rape is troubling, too, because it is
written, as the rest of the play, in a present active tense. In a way, this witnessing of the
rape by the audience can become a meta-theatrical re-victimization of the survivor
character. As the spectator sits in her seat and literally does nothing to end the sexual
assault, she becomes a participant in Dvori’s victimization. This is not to say that all
theatre which depicts scenes of violence or murder are necessarily implicating the
audience in those acts. But present active tense *is* a problem in advocacy theatre which
demands action on the part of the audience. Just as no one intervened in the real gang
rape case, no one is able to intervene on the behalf of Dvori. Her trauma will occur again
every time the play is performed. The only advocate for Dvori is her defense attorney,
played by the same actress. The defense attorney will also experience a staged figurative
rape scene at the hands of the defense attorneys, played by the same actors that play the
perpetrators. The parallel is intentional and the subtext unavoidable: The rape survivor’s
only advocate is herself and that advocacy is silenced.

Unlike most of the texts examined in my research, *Games in the Backyard* is set
in third-person narrative. A third-person perspective attempts not to privilege either the
survivor or perpetrator. But in its efforts to be objective, it privileges the masculine power
structure which traditionally silences its victims. Essentially, in refusing to “pick a side,”
Mazya has sided with the dominant male culture. By not subverting rape culture, *Games

²² Gesser-Edelsburg, Anat. “Paradoxical outcomes in an educational drama about gang rape: ethical responsibilities
of practitioners and educators.” University of Haifa, Israel. Research in Drama Education, Vol. 10, No. 2, June
in the Backyard reinforces it. As Urian writes, some critics feel that the play doesn’t even attempt objectivity: “Esther Eilam, one of the founders of the Israeli Feminist Movement, is convinced that the play creates a ‘pornographization of rape’, by presenting the rape from the point of view of the rapists and not of the victim.” Images taken from Games smack of the pornographic, especially in photography stills and film advertisement for the play. One YouTube clip uploaded by a male director of a recent production shows a scantily clad teenage girl moving, blind-folded, across a playground. The male gaze is apparent in the camera as it moves with the girl, revealing only the feet of a group of teenage boys, clearly standing behind the lens. One rape survivor responded to the play, saying that she was disturbed to never discover how Dvori felt about the events. Gesser-Edelsburg echoes her criticism:

[T]he creators of Backyard Games could have chosen to tell the story … differently, from the point of view of the victim. The theatrical text could have told of her feelings, her fears, her pains, her struggle and her breakdown after the rape….young people could have been exposed to the violence of sexual coercion and identified with the weak party, whose story is belittled and denied.

In addition to form, there are other serious issues in the play. Thematically, Games in the Backyard has a multitude of problems. Both textually and in performance, Dvori is blamed for the rape. She is portrayed in the script as a provocative tease who encourages the group of teenage boys to assault her by telling sexual stories and acting

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25 Urian. 105-24.
flirtatiously. Many production stills seem intentionally erotic, showing the lone actress standing on a playground swing over the bewildered male characters or blindfolded and surrounded by lustful boys. Visually, she is the seductress, exerting sexual power over the helplessly hormonal teenage boys. Brian Lobel, an American student who directed a translation of the play at the University of Michigan went so far as to say, “It’s not a melodrama. Though there’s no denying that rape is the worst crime that can happen to a woman, rape is not always clean cut….there’s a little responsibility for her [Dvori] too.”

This attitude espousing the survivor’s responsibility for her rape is especially harmful in survivor’s theatre which aims to advocate on behalf of sexual assault survivors, most of whom already struggle with a culture that blames victims for sexual violence. A survivor’s dress, behavior, lifestyle, sexual history, relationship to the perpetrator, habits, and choices are all called into question after a sexual assault. Defense lawyers use victim-blaming tactics to try and prove their clients innocent. Family members think up reasons that something so painful could have happened because it is emotionally easier to have something or someone to blame. The general public seeks to make excuses for why violence happens, maybe because it is easier to believe that sexual violence is something we can always prevent from happening to us. Victim advocates are taught to dispel victim-blaming myths with a statement like: “It doesn’t matter what you wore, what you said, what you did, who you are. No one asks to be raped. Rape happens because someone chooses to rape.”

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29 Sexual Assault Response Network of Central Ohio (SARNCO). SARNCO Volunteer Advocate Manual
The results of Gesser-Edelsburg’s statistical analysis of *Games in the Backyard* are very telling. This research measured students’ perceptions about sexual assault before and after they viewed the performance:

The study results show that the performance strengthens the dominant male stereotype that views adolescent boys as sexual beings who need relief in any possible way. Girls who are raped are seen as not taking care of themselves and the blame is placed, at least partly, on them….The main research findings… were that following the performance the degree of guilt the students ascribed to the girl for being raped grew significantly….In addition, there was a significant increase in the tendency to believe boys can be drawn into a situation where they will try to rape a girl.30

While the myriad of difficulties found in *Games in the Backyard* cannot be solely linked to matters of form, it is clear that both the traditional climactic structure of the text, as well as its third-person narrative which favors the male perpetrators, can be blamed for many of the problems inherent in calling it successful advocacy theatre.

**Successful Form in Maria’s Pictures**

*Maria’s Pictures* is a short monodrama by Lydia Scheuermann Hodak, taken from first-hand accounts of rape survivors in the Bosnian conflicts of the 1990s. The play’s narrator, Maria, is a 50 year-old woman who recounts her story, jumping back and forth

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between the present in her hospital room and the past, in which she and her daughter were assaulted by soldiers and both become pregnant.

The plot structure is episodic, in spite of being what is essentially one long monologue. Although Maria sets out to tell us the story of what has brought her to this moment in the hospital in 1992, she frequently jumps around to other places and times in her life as her memories trigger one another, recalling incidents from her childhood and the early days of her marriage. There are memories within memories for Maria as she remembers her daughter remembering after they were taken by the soldiers:

Do you remember, Mamma, when we went to Mljet Island, how we always sat in the sand as the sun was going down….Do you remember, Mamma, she said. She spoke gently and tenderly, she talked a lot, as if she were trying to make up for the months of silence, she spoke in images and I felt so close to her that it was like a pain to me….So that’s what we did, my young daughter and I. That ugly morning that we thought was our last, we remembered only the bright, happy hours. We talked about our sunny days—and alone once again on that morning we thought would be our last.31

While Maria occasionally recalls traumatic experiences, she does not relive them onstage but communicates them to an audience as past events. She alternates between several times in her life – the life before she and her daughter are taken by soldiers, her life as a girl, her life as a mother, the rape and after, and her sessions with the psychologist. The playwright refers to these moments in the script as “memories and confession.” While all of these realities are communicated as past tense, except for the moments when she addresses the audience directly as she paints in her hospital room,

occasionally Maria will perform the physicality of being there: “Lucia’s hand moved towards me. (MARIA searches with her hand on the floor.)” 32 Hodak is clear, however, in her plentiful stage directions that Maria is only remembering. She has not physically returned to that moment. All of the reflection of Maria’s Pictures brings us into the final, and rare, present tense moment of Maria when she makes the decision not to legally adopt her late daughter’s baby. The stage directions read:

Maria picks up the document and slowly and systematically tears it into little pieces, and throws them, together with the pen, onto the dirty clothes, picks up her refugee plastic bag, lifts her head and walks out. The End. 33

Unlike Games in the Backyard, we view the entire world of this play through Maria’s eyes. She performs the roles of her daughter and of her psychologist without dismissing her own identity. She does not ever become them. Maria’s Pictures is clearly not an objective play. It is completely rendered through the lens of the survivor. Not only is the past given to us from Maria’s own perspective, but the sounds and sensations she has experienced and remembers in the present are delivered to us. “The spring dawn oozed through a crack in the door. (A ray of cold light slowly illuminates MARIA through the crack.)” 34 Repeatedly throughout the script, Maria breaks down emotionally, telling us about her fears, her heartbreak, her feelings of guilt and shame. While the narrator occasionally blurs the details of her story and we are sometimes left with an incomplete picture of exactly what happened, we are, as an audience, made completely aware of Maria’s emotional state in the aftermath of her rape. Advocacy theatre is not meant to titillate curious spectators with the lurid details of sexual violence but to

32 Scheuermann Hodak 124.
33 Scheuermann Hodak 130.
34 Scheuermann Hodak 124.
communicate the effects of this violence on survivors and the ways in which survivors can heal after trauma.

*Maria’s Pictures* can be considered successful as advocacy theatre not only because it portrays Maria as a victim of sexual violence – and there is no question in this play about whose fault rape is – but because it portrays Maria as a survivor. The consequences of violence in Maria’s life are not romanticized. We are presented with an ugly reality of rape in military conflict. The episodic quality of the play allows Maria to survive the telling of it. She does not have to dwell on the traumatic events but can remember and relate to other times in her life. Because it is written in past tense, the play does not ask the survivor character to be re-traumatized but instead allows her to communicate her experience from a safe emotional distance. As spectators, we are forced to view the world as co-survivors with Maria. We become partners in her survival as we see the world through her eyes.

**Function**

In order to determine the potential efficacy of advocacy theatre for survivors of sexual violence, we must be able to define and explain the function of drama as advocacy. In this context, I will discuss four functions of advocacy theatre: therapy, education and awareness, witnessing, and a call to action. The first two are primarily for the performer and the remaining two for the spectator. One or more of these functions will be present in each of the pieces analyzed in this chapter. Some functions are accomplished directly through dramatic text while others become apparent in the performative body and voice.
Therapy

As previously discussed in the introduction, one of the foremost associations of applied drama is its connection to drama therapy. While drama therapy techniques and philosophy are beyond the scope of this document, I think it is important to mention the therapeutic elements for performers found in advocacy theatre.

Many of the pieces discussed in this thesis were devised and performed by survivors. When asked about their reasons for creating/performing, they often talk about their desire to heal through sharing their stories and experiences.

Witnessing and the Community as Survivor

Many of the more well-known examples of advocacy theatre emphasize the importance of the community in the process of survival and recovery. Witnessing is a silent agreement between performer and spectator, an agreement that the performance of trauma will be physically seen and acknowledged as truth. Theatre practitioner Julie Salverson defines witnessing as:

[A]n act through which an incident of violence is understood as significant and is responded to by someone other than the direct victim of that violence, an act ultimately perceivable by the survivor as actual changed conditions in the world around him or her, e.g. the conditions that encourage people to drink and drive become conditions that discourage such behavior.35

More than simply admitting that sexual violence occurs, witnessing demands that the community take on the survivor’s suffering as its own. It is through this identification

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with the survivor that the community (represented by the audience) agrees that the sexual violence perpetrated on one is perpetrated on many and that the violence affects the community because survivors are part of the community. Salverson elaborates, “A climate of witnessing thus involves not only listening to someone's story, but allowing our attitudes and behaviors to be changed by it.”

**Education and Awareness**

Advocacy theatre has also been used as a pedagogical tool. It can be used to communicate facts and statistics, raise awareness about an issue, and encourage dialogue about sexual violence and the way it impacts a community. Within advocacy theatre, interactive theatre groups focus on the educational aspects of drama the most. Using August Boal’s interactive theatre techniques, which he calls “rehearsal for the revolution,” an audience member can move from passive spectator to active “spect-actor.” The idea is that the practice of finding solutions to social issues in a theatrical setting allows the community to practice solving problems for themselves. Interactive theatre groups like the popular *Sex Signals* use a combination of dramatic scenes and audience discussion and participation to create an environment in which the audience and actors together can practice making choices that can help to prevent sexual violence. While interactive groups tend to focus on prevention, ie. how does one obtain consent from a potential partner, other theatre groups use drama to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence.

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36 Salverson 181-191.  
Call to Action

Advocacy theatre may also include what might be termed a “call to action.” While this idea is closely tied to witnessing,—and sometimes witnessing itself is the action—the call for audience response can be defined more broadly as a direct challenge to the audience to do something differently.

Women’s Circus and the Body as Advocate

Popularly known as “social circus,” contemporary circus companies that specialize in advocacy for minority groups and marginalized communities abound. Generally, social circus refers to a group or company that uses circus technique and training to reach an at-risk demographic such as underprivileged youth, immigrant populations, senior adults, or sexual assault survivors. As a movement, the focus of social circus tends to be on the act of training rather than on the results of training as seen in performance. Student-centered and specifically geared to promote confidence, self-awareness, physical skills, and emotional healing, companies that engage in this kind of work are generally non-profit, community-based ventures that utilize the physical discipline of the circus along with the meta-theatrical act of self-risk in order to empower and effect change. Social circus, borrowing heavily from drama and art therapy, uses circus techniques to address the needs of marginalized groups. Two social circuses in Australia, the Women’s Circus and the Vulcana Women’s Circus, work specifically with survivors of sexual violence.

The Women’s Circus’s mission statement states that it:
[P]rovides opportunities for women from all backgrounds to acquire physical, technical and musical skills while working in a safe, non-competitive and supportive environment. It presents feminism to the wider community through dynamic, high-quality circus/physical theatre, performances and workshops.  

The focus of the Women’s Circus is on the every-woman or perhaps more correctly, the any-woman. No restriction is placed on a member, regardless of age, skill, or potential disability. In fact, groups like the Mangoes, a smaller group that grew out of Women’s Circus, focuses on issues that women with larger bodies face, and Performing Older Women Circus (POW) specifically uses circus techniques for women over forty. Louise Radcliffe-Smith writes, “Diversity, access and inclusiveness are basic tenets of Women’s Circus philosophy. Any woman can join the circus…. ”  

One of the circus’s founders, former artistic director Donna Jackson said she felt a strong need to combine her skills as a theatre artist with her passion for helping survivors of sexual violence. Out of this desire came the Women’s Circus. “It was important to develop a place where we could work on my/our strengths,” she writes, “And to present women as strong and in control rather than always working in the defensive.”  

Circus artist Karen Martin’s apt description of the Women’s Circus philosophy includes the following: “We are working our bodies physically and politically to affirm control of our (in some circumstances) previously abused bodies.”  

Unlike many of the other examples in my research, Women’s Circus is primarily a performance of the body first, the text second. While text is an important element in Women’s Circus performance, it is not the main focus of

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39 Beissbarth 34-35.
40 Beissbarth 4.
41 Beissbarth 26.
training, rehearsal, or performance. Advocates of Women’s Circus talk about the power of the body in survivor healing and empowerment. Often the corporeal becomes the visual mouthpiece of the survivor.

_Secrets_, a 2001 production of Women’s Circus, explores the survival of childhood sexual abuse experienced by circus participants. A group of women together create the metaphorical body of the survivor, not only alluding to the community, but to the literal body of the community, all affected by sexual violence.

The narrative of Secrets was performed by stilt-walkers and acrobats, as well as aerialists using trapeze swings and tissue swings…These…were interwoven with narratives, spoken by women not seen by the audience…that related the women’s memories of sexual molestation….it is the network of interconnections between self and other, mind and body, individual and world, that produces possibilities for change.42

The necessity of community in circus theatre is heavily emphasized by Women’s Circus. Founder Sally Forth describes the use of group work, like pyramids, to create a successful group dynamic:

Groups of eight or ten or more are needed to create a whole…We love them [pyramids] because they reflect for us the political philosophy of the circus: that together we can do more than on our own. Supporting, balancing and harmonizing. No competition, no judgement, and strong backs, arms and thighs. Commitment to something beyond the ’me.’”43

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43 Wawrzinek 85.
The major significance of Women’s Circus in survivor’s theatre is its focus on a bodily communication of the story of survival for the purpose of survival. The women involved are recovering from trauma through the process of learning circus and theatre techniques and utilizing those skills in public performance to share their experiences of sexual violence, which moves their work from dramatherapy to advocacy theatre.

**Rhodessa Jones and the Call to Action**

Another example of advocacy theatre, The Medea Project, is headed by theatre artist/dancer/actress/playwright/activist Rhodessa Jones. The theatre group develops its productions through a series of workshops, interviews, and rehearsals with incarcerated women and culminates in public performance. Most of the women who perform with The Medea Project are incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated, women. The framework for the performance text is centered around Greek mythology. Using poetry, dance, song, monologue, dialogue, and audience interaction, the group works to reframe the violence, abuse, and pain experienced by incarcerated women. Sexual violence is a heavily repeated topic in this project. The Medea Project works to accomplish all four functions of advocacy theatre – therapy, witnessing, education, and a call to action. It is therapeutic for the inmates/survivors involved and it creates an opportunity for witnessing that survival. In the 1999 production, *Slouching Towards Armageddon*, a Medea Project play, Darcell Bernard, one of the actresses, playing the character, Revenge, relates her own story of sexual assault in an unflinching and graphic monologue. “He fucked me and then he cut my throat. (Hands up to throat, head tilts, scar visible.) He was smiling the whole mother fucking time,” Revenge says, backed by a chorus of other women. The act of
revealing the scar – and the truth behind it – is a bold declaration of reality to the
audience. They witness the physical consequence of her assault and they acknowledge
her survival. Fraden comments, “When Bernard tells her story, she becomes visible, and
we cannot bear the thought that she will be silenced again.”

Perhaps most significant to advocacy theatre for survivors of sexual violence is Jones’s assertion that violence and trauma, which often serve as a catalyst for the incarceration of women, affect the entire community, not just female inmates or even just female survivors. In her solo-performance piece, *Big Butt Girls, Hard Headed Women*, she describes this notion of the community itself as a survivor of violence:

> How many people have ever been mugged? Show of hands, please….Been raped?

Know somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody who’s killed somebody. My point is, we’re all involved here….Let us not forget to remember that the struggle continues for all of us.

In her definitive work on Jones, Rena Fraden writes:

> [J]ones wants her theatre to be a call to community, to thinking about what a proper community should look like and what sorts of social action would have to take place to bring that community into being.


In *Big Butt Girls*, like some of her other work, Jones graphically depicts sexual assault and its consequences using mime and dance, as well as text. While her performance pieces are often based on personal experience, she is firm in her commitment to the community for which she speaks and in her belief that the audience is part of that community. There is an unwavering demand in her work that we, the audience, recognize ourselves in these survivors and that we recognize the need to survive within ourselves.

“[J]ones also wants to transform the way an audience traditionally performs,” Fraden concludes. “She wants her audience, not just her actresses, to act, to take responsibility …Jones opens up the public intersection.”

Rhodessa Jones’s work, both as a solo-artist and as a facilitator for incarcerated women’s theatre productions, is important not simply because it strives to advocate for women in prison, many of whom have experienced sexual violence, but also because Jones avoids romanticizing her work as an advocate.

I never set out to say I was going to transform everybody’s lives. I wish I could have done more so that they owned their lives, themselves, and were clear about the future…. That’s OK, I don’t feel I failed. Here’s the other side. I look around me and see that little girl in my office today [Angie Wilson, a formerly incarcerated woman who participated in The Medea Project]. I can be her sister, teacher, artist, friend—that just takes humanity.

47 Fraden.
The Vagina Monologues: When Advocacy Becomes a Movement

A discussion of survivor advocacy in theatre must naturally include one of the most well-known plays of its kind, *The Vagina Monologues*. Based on hundreds of interviews playwright and performance artist Eve Ensler conducted with women about their vaginas, the play includes several well-known monologues about sexual violence including “My Vagina was My Village” and “The Little Cootchie Snorcher That Could.” The play was first produced in 1994 leading to an off-Broadway run and tour. In 1998, Ensler helped found V-Day (an annual event produced by advocacy groups, communities, universities, and others across the globe that includes productions of *The Vagina Monologues*):

After every performance, Ensler found women waiting to share their own stories of survival, leading her to see that The Vagina Monologues could be more than a moving work of art on violence; she divined that the performances could be a mechanism for moving people to act to end violence. 49

V-Day has expanded its focus to include several other works including *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant and A Prayer* and *Any One of Us: Words from Prison*. Additionally, V-Day sponsors their annual Spotlight campaign which brings focus to an area of the world where women are at particular risk of experiencing violence including the Democratic Republic of Congo, New Orleans, and Haiti. Ensler includes a new monologue highlighting this spotlight area that is included in community and college productions of *The Vagina Monologues*. 10% of all proceeds from those productions go directly to the Spotlight campaign. Beyond this, V-Day has begun other campaigns that

focus on girls, men’s role in ending violence, scholarships for women and girls, and one of the most recent developments, City of Joy, a new live-in community village in the Congo for women survivors to go to for a year of healing, education, training, and safety.50

Eve Ensler’s work is important to advocacy theatre for several reasons. The Vagina Monologues is openly a play about the survival of women. The performance of The Vagina Monologues is done, not only in honor of survivors, but to benefit them since most proceeds from productions go directly to assist survivors of sexual and domestic violence, both locally and globally. And its success as advocacy theatre is well-documented. According to the website, since its beginning, “the V-Day movement has raised over $80 million and reached over 300 million people.”51 Currently, an estimated 5400 V-Day events are produced every year. According to V-Day’s latest fiscal earnings report, “V-Days College and Community Campaigns raised […] $4 million dollars in 2010 that V-Activists donated directly to anti-violence groups in their communities.”52

Beyond the sheer numbers, which are impressive, Ensler notes the power of the play itself in creating and reinforcing relationships between survivors and community. She writes:

I did not realize the full potential and viability of the theatre when I began The Vagina Monologues….I had yet to understand…its ability to explode trauma, create public discourse, empower people on the deepest political and spiritual levels, and ultimately move them to action….By placing them in the context of a theatrical structure, the stories themselves became part of a larger community.

That experience taught me that the theatre is sacred, because it allows—
encourages—us as a community of strangers to face together realities that may be
too difficult to confront alone.\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{The Vagina Monologues} is a series of individuals’ stories, amassed into one
script. While many of the cited productions in this research focus on the specificity of the
solo artist performing work based on her own life, \textit{Monologues} is uniquely universal in
its approach. Regardless of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background and theatre
experience, women are encouraged to perform the stories of other women. The overall
feeling of community that drives V-Day productions extends from the performing cast to
the audience experience. The monologues are delivered in direct address and productions
often encourage vocal response from the audience. Women who participate in \textit{The
Vagina Monologues}, both on stage, behind the scenes, and in the audience, often
participate in V-Treat, a slumber party event to share the empowerment they feel as
women and the connection they feel with the now-familiar stories of both triumph and
oppression.

Ensler cites one of her performances of the play when a survivor in the audience,
triggered by memories of her own abuse, fainted during the monologue that recounts the
sexual assault of a Bosnian woman:

We stopped the show, turned on the lights, brought cold water. […] In the context
of the theater that night, her suffering became our suffering. Audience members
held her and spoke gently to her. Her abuse found a context and her suffering

became legitimized, as her personal history became part of a larger social order that oppressed all women.54

Taken from the introduction to the monologue, “My Vagina Was My Village,” *The Vagina Monologues* narrator begins this way:

Bosnian women refugees were interviewed during the war in Yugoslavia, in refugee camps and centers. Twenty to seventy-thousand women were raped in the middle of Europe as a systematic tactic of war. It was shocking to see how little people did to stop it. But, then again, in the United States, each year, about two hundred thousand women are raped, which is another kind of war.55

**Empowerment Theatre**

Empowerment Theatre Company [ETC] is an excellent example of a group whose advocacy theatre functions in all four of the ways discussed: it provides therapy for survivors, encourages a witnessing by the audience, increases awareness and education about the social issues surrounding sexual violence, and includes a clear call to action. It is also an important group to examine as very little has been written about it since its inception early last year. It is also the only theatre company that I can find that states its sole purpose as advocacy for survivors of sexual violence. Formed in January 2010, Empowerment Theatre Company is a U.K. based organization that utilizes theater to focus exclusively on sexual violence. On their website, they define their mission as a group:

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Empowerment was formed with the aim of working for and with people affected by sexual abuse by using theatre as a method of support for survivors, engagement with people indirectly affected by sexual abuse and education to the wider community on the issues surrounding rape, sexual and domestic abuse, including education and outreach work.  

The company’s goals are two-fold, focusing both on direct service with survivors and co-survivors and also on education/awareness-building within the larger community. In 2010 the group produced four projects using workshop, forum theatre, and interactive theatre techniques. Interestingly, the website insists that Empowerment Theatre doesn’t wish to make a distinction between actors and survivors. The productions are devised through workshops in which survivors share their stories and experiences using theatre techniques. With the permission of survivors, these stories are then relayed to the acting ensemble which may use as research for the creation of publicly performed pieces.

Survivors, ETC informs us, are the most integral and important element of their work. While survivors do not always directly perform the work based on their experiences, ETC welcomes survivors to join the performing ensemble. They also encourage the involvement of educators, therapists, theatre artists, and activists.

Empowerment Theatre is clear that one of its primary goals is to use theatre for survivors as a means of support and therapy. Its first project in January 2010, the Surviving Together workshop utilized forum theatre techniques to work with survivors, specifically female CSA survivors. On their website, ETC affirms its belief that theatre

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57 Empowerment Theatre.
58 CSA, commonly accepted abbreviation of childhood sexual abuse.
can help to provide mental health care for survivors, as well as to increase awareness for the outside community. The workshops, developed and taught by creative director and co-founder, Lucinda Bray, are informed by Bray’s training as a social justice activist and survivor advocate and by advisement and support from other professionals working in the field.59

*The Bird Cage Project* (2010) was performed for the general public and combined elements of witnessing through the use of survivors’ shared stories and awareness-building/education that specifically focused on sexual violence laws in Great Britain. Of the beginning projects listed on their website, *The Bird Cage Project* seems to include the most traditional theatrical elements including cabaret music and textual sampling from published dramatic texts.60 Lucinda Bray comments:

> A significant part of the Birdcage project was to assess the audience’s understanding of rape and is affect before the show and then after through questionnaires. The audience for this show was small, and interestingly mainly male, but there was definite evidence of a better understanding on the legal issues of rape and serious sexual assault and a considered attitude to coercion.61

As a call to action, *Helping Mark* (2010), their latest project, has been produced twice and uses forum theatre to guide the audience through an interaction after the performance of a devised theatre piece. *Helping Mark* was commissioned by the Sexual

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Violence Alliance, a non-profit organization in the United Kingdom and is a good example of theatre demanding action from its audience: “As the purpose of the production was to encourage possible volunteers from the target community to engage with this new project [through the Sexual Violence Alliance] on the issues of sexual and domestic violence we focused on the issue of community action being necessary…” 62

As we end this overview of form and function, it is important to note that these are descriptive characteristics observable in performance texts and production found in this research. While the effectiveness of each can be argued, the purpose of this chapter is mainly to describe common traits within the genre. In order to further explore issues of form and function in advocacy theatre, Chapter 3 will deal specifically with one performance text, Jeanine Thompson’s *Breaking the Current*. 

62 Bray.
Chapter 3: Case Study - Form and Function in Jeanine Thompson’s *Breaking the Current*

The purpose of this section is to analyze a specific example of survivor’s theatre in a more in-depth way. This discussion is not intended to be prescriptive of survivor’s theatre but rather descriptive. After briefly introducing the artist’s background as it relates to devising and performing this kind of work and summarizing the content and narrative of the play, I will discuss the characteristics and trends defined and explored in the previous section as they relate to *Breaking the Current*. The comparison of these trends to what is observable in the text and performance of *Breaking the Current* is valuable in helping to evaluate it as an example of survivor’s theatre and evaluate its efficacy as an example of advocacy for survivors of sexual violence.

**Background**

Jeanine Thompson began her career as a dancer, specifically focusing on modern dance and story-telling with movement. She studied at the Virginia Tanner Dance studio in Salt Lake City, Utah. In her teens, she began developing her skills as an actress. As an adult, she attended the University of Utah, majoring in modern dance and theatre. She continued her artistic career as a professional dancer and actress. In 1985, she began a close working relationship with renowned mime artist Marcel Marceau that continued until his death in 2007. Speaking about how this training has influenced her work as an artist, she says:
[W]ithin the art of mime, it is all about getting to the essence of the movement, the essence of the thought or emotion or character. So it’s – it’s a process of distillation. And another great aspect of mime is that it speaks universally. So you don’t have to be from a certain culture and a certain age in order to get it, to feel it. But it can, it can speak to any gender, and to anyone from around the world. 63

In addition to her previous mime and dance training, Thompson received her B.A. and M.F.A. in dance from The Ohio State University. Overall, Jeanine credits her varied training with allowing her to utilize more than one technique as a playwright and performer: “[B]y working from multiple options instead of just knowing I need to write a text and stand and deliver it. That’s how I work. I think, ‘What is the best modality for expressing this thought and emotion?’” This diverse background is apparent in the creation and performance of Breaking the Current.

Process and Influences

“That’s where I’m used to living…in space and time. But to live in pen, pencil to paper, was an exciting new thing,” Thompson tells me. Interestingly, in our second interview, she notes that Breaking the Current is the first work she has devised that began with text, rather than music or movement. While all of her work is greatly influenced by and developed through dance and mime, Breaking the Current is situated uniquely as a textual work, as well. And the text itself influences the movement.

For Thompson, a dancer and mime by training, movement-based theatre is natural. She is constantly aware of the influence of movement and dance on her theatrical work: “[W]ith theatre, how can I utilize my movement knowledge to really utilize all that—your whole body as an instrument for acting? …whether it be realistic or abstract…”

Trying to separate text and the auditory from movement and the visual in Thompson’s work is difficult because, traditionally for her, the first relies so heavily on the presence of the second. BTC was the first text she had written and performed in a solo show. Indeed, Thompson tends to communicate in images and the translation of those images into the corporeal body of the performer. So when text serves as a starting point in the creation of Breaking the Current, it is important to note because it is indicative of the purposeful way in which this text attempts to advocate for the survivor. “I knew that I wanted to write about my life…and about survival….I knew that I had stories to tell. Some were fun. Some were sad. But the main thread, throughout all of it, that I can see now, at this point in my life, was survival.”

She describes a methodical process, beginning with a list of stories she wanted to tell and the order they might be presented. These stories are primarily autobiographical and their place in the piece is, again, purposeful. There is an awareness about her devising process. “I knew this was not journaling,” she says. Her writing was always meant to be performative.

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64 Thompson.
*Breaking the Current* is also unique in relationship to other text-based works dealing with survival of sexual violence. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange (U.S.A., 1975) shares many of its themes and poetic style, as well as its written stage directions. It is important to note that Ms. Thompson cites the original San Francisco production of *For Colored Girls* as a huge stylistic and thematic influence on her own work as a playwright and performer, and, in particular, an inspiration for *Breaking the Current*.

[…] it’s just the woman on the stage, recounting this story. But the way that it’s written, which is very poetic, and the way that it was performed was much more lyrical. That’s what hit my heart. I think if it would have been done in a different way […], I would have edited it, and it would have landed differently in my brain. But because of its lyricism and its poetry, its essential nature, it went straight to my heart.67

In comparison with Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, *Breaking the Current* seems almost literal. It is easy to find similarities between Shange’s “choreopoem” and Thompson’s writing but their styles are as unique as their voices. Though *For Colored Girls* is now thought of as an ensemble piece, it began as two-woman performance, done by Shange herself and dancer Paula Moss, work-shopped in small communal venues in San

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67 Thompson, Jeanine. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2010.
Francisco. Jeanine Thompson did not see this original working of the play but did see multiple performances of its Broadway tour in San Francisco in 1978.

Synopsis and Textual Analysis

*Breaking the Current* is relatively short, running between 65-75 minutes, and includes eighteen brief scenes. Each scene tells a different story of survival through the eyes of the narrator character, Ms. Sarah Toad. The first scene is introductory, in nature, and offers the framework for the entire piece, a metaphorical “ride” for which we should “Make sure our seatbelts are securely fastened.” We are immediately introduced to the concept of survival, however basic it may seem.

The carnival metaphor, especially emphasized by the sound design which calls for “calliope music…roller coaster track rattle…as if the ride is going around the audience” sets up a seeming lack of control for the spectator. In fact, it seems as if a great amount of tension in the play, both textually and in performance, is driven by the issue of control. “That’s a very key important notion of this story. Where you have control, where you don’t have control. And how you can survive it.” Thompson’s stage directions in the first page of the script seem to place her narrator in control at the beginning as the “guide” character, taking the audience “for a ride.” The audience is also introduced to the

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69 Reference to the character of Mr. Toad and “his wild ride” in literary classic, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, published in 1908. A significant connection to a childhood literary character that fights suppression and longs for freedom and adventure. It is not a perfect metaphor, by any means, as Toad drives a motorcar and the “ride” in BTC is imagined more as an amusement park ride but the interplay between being the driver and the passenger is interesting in relation to Thompson’s exploration of power and control. This literary comparison is also echoed in the appearance of the Ms. Sarah Toad in riding goggles, similar to Mr. Toad, and driving a Red Flyer wagon.
71 Thompson, Jeanine. Personal Interview. 24 Nov. 2010.
narrator herself who seems to inhabit a strange in-between place, even, perhaps, outside of time. There is a feeling that we are engaging with an old child, wise beyond her years. The second scene carries a particular menace in its descriptions of the Rocky Mountain region where Ms. Toad’s story begins. Words like “armed,” “vertical,” and “rocky” seem to almost say more than the near throw-away line, “They also have the highest rape per capita.”\[^{72}\] The mountain climbing imagery is particularly interesting in terms of the notion of survival skills. Scene Three describes a fight for control when Ms. Toad tells the audience about her bicycle ride down a steep hill:

> Slowly at first, but then picking up speed I raced down the hill faster that I had ever imagined I could go. And for one instant, I, was one of them. I, had passed from being the little girl, sitting on the sidelines, to being – a contender! Roaring victoriously down the race track of life. Then all of a sudden, I was going faster than I could control.\[^{73}\]

The monologue continues to speed up culminating in the re-telling of the bike’s crash and Sarah’s recovery. Scenes four and five capture the feeling of isolation that Sarah feels as a child, a feeling connected to abuse and neglect. “I was left alone,” she tells us. “And alone with my brother, {slap} way too much.”\[^{74}\] Scene six includes an allusion to a later scene on avalanche training dogs. It also serves to help continue to shape a picture of the child Sarah Toad who trusted dogs, but not necessarily people.\[^{75}\]

There are points in the script where Thompson is less direct in her story-telling, relying more on the unspoken, on sound effects, and on movement and image to convey

\[^{73}\] Thompson.
\[^{74}\] Thompson.
\[^{75}\] Thompson.
what are, seemingly, more traumatic portions of the story. The text in these sections is slightly sporadic and includes voice-overs. Scene seven deals with childhood abuse with very little spoken text. The silences between phrases in this scene are important, however, and can really only be experienced in performance. “Sarah. Where are you, Sarah?” calls a voice from offstage. Sarah does not answer the voice audibly. “Come here, Sarah,” says the voice later. Sarah responds wordlessly. “I have brought that to the forefront of this piece—feeling silenced,” Thompson said in an interview.76 Silences continue throughout Breaking the Current. Thompson’s own performance of these moments is almost as interesting as the moments themselves because as an audience, we are made keenly aware of Sarah Toad’s desire to speak, to make a sound, to move, to do something. The silence becomes a kind of paralysis.

Scene eight is our first glimpse, as an audience, of substance abuse as a coping mechanism and form of survival. One striking moment in the scene comes at the end of the monologue where Sarah describes the teenage girl with a heroin needle in her arm. The stage direction that immediately follows reads: “Pause for a long time to look at her in front of me. Foreshadowing.”77 Again, there is a moment of identity crisis that echoes the “out-of-body experience” Sarah will describe in a later scene. The two scenes following continue the drug theme.

One of the shorter units, scene eleven recalls, rather matter-of-factly, the presence of Ted Bundy at one of Sarah Toad’s high school theatre productions. The description of his exit is perhaps most interesting because it seems to mirror a later, and more dramatic,

exit of another perpetrator. The scene ends with what is becoming a familiar refrain: “survival skills.”

Jeanine Thompson usually refers to scene twelve as “the three position exercise.” The narrator tells us about being stalked and sexually assaulted by a serial killer in Salt Lake City. The scene is more focused on a series of stage pictures and visual moments than on the words which are delivered in voiceover. And again, Thompson specifically plots out silence within her writing.

“Saving Lynda From Drowning,” or scene thirteen, is often performed as a solo piece. It is fairly self-contained, especially in comparison with other sections of the play. Its most important function in terms of communicating to and about survivors is the renewal of focus on positive survival skills. The narrator moves from being acted upon to acting. She literally breaks the current. It’s also particularly interesting as a mime performance accompanied by text. There is a sense of hopefulness about this scene: “And I, once again, came buoyantly bobbing to the surface….”

In scene fourteen, substance abuse returns as one of Sarah Toad’s coping strategies. The more need described by Sarah in the stage directions, the less control she seems to have. The scene ends as she flashes back to scene eight and the teenage girl using heroin. She looks into the mirror: “[I] realize I have become the girl on the trash canister.”

As Sarah Toad has already established, she trusts dogs, not people. So when the audience arrives at scene fifteen or “Avalanche Training a Dog,” the metaphor is not lost. When the dog she has trained digs her out of the snow, saving her life, it is not just her

78 Thompson.
79 Thompson.
80 Thompson.
trust in the dog that helps her to survive. It’s ultimately her trust in her ability to train the
dog, to bury herself in the snow, and essentially, to rescue herself. The last line of the
scene is heartbreakingly understandable to the audience by now: “You lost me?” she asks
the other trainer. Scenes sixteen and seventeen have no spoken text but address drug use
and childhood sexual abuse, followed by a repetition or rewinding of the play through a
series of visual images. Breaking the Current ends simply by promising to tell a different
story “next time.” Taken as a hopeful message for the future that Ms. Sarah Toad’s “wild
ride” has not ended but goes on to happier stories, it seems to work well.

Form and Function

Plot structure

Breaking the Current is structured as a series of episodes. While it proceeds
chronologically, events in the narrative are chosen thematically, around the subject of
personal survival. Each individual section has its own dramatic arc and climax.
Thompson has even performed certain sections as independent selections an
d says they work well out of the context of the play. The episodic structure follows the
common trend of other advocacy theatre texts.

Perspective

Breaking the Current is written in first-person narrative, although it takes an
interesting twist that is reminiscent of one of Thompson’s admitted sources of inspiration,
For Colored Girls. There is an internal struggle for the narrator to establish identity as
she continually switches between first and third-person narration, forcing the audience to

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81 Thompson.
wonder if she’s telling her own story or someone else’s. This is meta-theatrical in that it is not only Sarah Toad vs. other but it is also Sarah Toad vs. Thompson. Throughout the opening scenes, Sarah will constantly edit herself: “Once there was a girl and she I was born in Salt Lake City” [sic] and later, “Actually I was, actually she, she was born.” She will finally make a decision to identify herself as the protagonist, as the stage directions tell us in Scene Three: “[I, she, [revealing self], [knowingly stated], I, I decided…” 82

Part of this tension between self and other may be born out of what Jeanine Thompson calls “survivor speak,” which she defines as a kind of “disassociation” in order to be able to talk about something traumatic with sufficient emotional safety 83. This is established through a kind of distancing of self when recounting trauma. The tension that exists between the narrator/performer and Sarah Toad the survivor is important and the conscious choice the performer makes to identify herself as that survivor is even more important. It, again, speaks to the extreme self-awareness of this piece as a survivor’s story. Except for For Colored Girls, I cannot find another example within advocacy theatre of this tension within the narrator’s personal identity. BTC seems notable for this interplay between self and other as it directly relates to issues of self and fear of disclosure that survivors face. In video footage, Thompson’s performance of confusion and the very deliberate moment in which she visually chooses to claim Sarah as herself (as performer) is one of the most strikingly honest moments in the play.

**Tense and the Body as Advocate**

*Breaking the Current* does make a slight departure from the characteristically past tense narrative of survivor’s theatre. While Sarah communicates her story in a primarily

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82 Thompson.
83 Thompson, Jeanine. Personal Interview. 15 Nov. 2010.
chronological sequence of scenes presented as past events, she occasionally “relives” small moments. One of the most memorable elements of the play is the “Three Position Exercise”, each gesture symbolic of an event in the series beginning with Sarah Toad’s sexual assault and continuing through the legal proceedings and healing process. This sequence takes on an almost ritualistic quality, similar to the one that Thompson describes in her memories of seeing *For Colored Girls*:

> [T]here’s also a story about a-a prostitute who, uh, cries herself to sleep. And she climbs in the tub and she’s like doing this ritual of cleansing herself off of all these men. And then she gets into bed and she cries herself to sleep. You know, so she seems like she’s in control, in control, but then you realize, no, it’s an act. It’s her way of trying to get through.84

It is the ritual of the prostitute character that fascinates Thompson. If you interpret her choreography in the Three Position Exercise as ritual, which it seems to become as it is repeated as different times throughout the piece, almost as a comfort mechanism, then the “reliving” bodily becomes a focus on recovery and healing, rather than victimization. Interestingly, Thompson only relives moments *bodily*, like “Three Position Exercise” and “Saving Lynda From Drowning” in which she mime-dances the effect of water on her body as she fights against the lake current to save her friend. The textual narration, however, continues to remain in the past tense. The scene in which Sarah tells the story of her assault, the language of the voice-over is matter-of-fact in both style and delivery:

> I was sleeping downstairs in my bedroom. My bedroom was located in the basement of my parents house. I heard a man’s voice say, “We have a gun to your parents head. Do exactly as I tell you to or it’s going to go off. […] I quickly

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84 Thompson.
realized […] with the slamming of my head to the pillow, being choked, with a handkerchief over my mouth, that this was not a dream.\(^8^5\)

This separation between the eternal present of the performer’s body and the past tense of narrative speaks to the notion of the body advocating for the survivor when the voice cannot.

The movement in *Breaking the Current* alternates between the extremely literal quality of Marceau-inspired mime and the more abstract gestures of modern and interpretative dance. A particularly frightening embodiment of the aftermath of trauma comes at the end of Scene Twelve. Thompson calls it “Silent Scream” in which she tries to put her entire fist into her mouth. In a review of the original production, Susan Wittstock describes her interview with Thompson:

> Her own sense of being silenced at times in her life is exhibited through Sarah. ‘I have brought that to the forefront of this piece—feeling silenced. There’s a repetitive gesture…’ She stops and demonstrates, quickly pulling her hand up to her lips and pushing it down again, ‘…of going to speak but not.’\(^8^6\)

So then, literally, the body describes what the survivor is encountering in recovery, becoming a visual mouthpiece. Thompson describes “Three-Position Exercise” as representative of “moving forward” but being dragged down by the memory of the assault. Each gesture signifies a very particular action, i.e. looking through mug shots at the police station, and each is performed with all the specificity of a well-trained mime. The ritual is slow at first. It is repeated, gaining speed and the gestures begin to melt into


one another until finally giving way to the water image Thompson calls one of the bigger challenges as a movement specialist. Even in silence—only instrumental music is heard during this section—the body continues to advocate on behalf of the survivor. Thompson describes this as the only moment where we see a glimpse of real and ugly trauma for Sarah Toad. But even in her inability to speak, Ms. Toad’s corporeal body speaks volumes about sexual violence and survival. This is not the first instance of silencing in *Breaking the Current*. Scene Seven takes us through an almost entirely wordless exchange between a young Sarah playing hopscotch and an unseen male perpetrator (recorded as a voice-over). Again, Sarah’s body speaks in her silence. “Where are you, Sarah?” the voice asks. Sarah shakes her head and continues to play. The voice persists until Sarah obeys and exits. The following stage directions read: “I reenter walking backwards. I am changed, altered, stunned. I drop the taw.” Thompson’s choreography becomes the embodiment of Sarah’s trauma.

But not all of *Breaking the Current*’s choreography focuses on powerlessness. Two scenes describe Sarah’s personal agency gained through more literal survival skills: “Saving Lynda From Drowning” and “Avalanche-Training a Dog.” Thompson leans heavily on her mime training, painting vivid word pictures with her entire body, particularly in the swimming section where she is able to mime floating, swimming, and nearly drowning. These two distinct scenes focus on the embodiment of personal triumph. The narrative body of Sarah Toad is successful as she saves her friend in Lake Powell and is dug free from the snow by a dog she trained herself and the corporeal body of the performer is successful in expressing these images. This is a clear reminder of
Thompson’s point – survival is not just not dying, it is moving forward. “I think that’s part of survival,” she says. “Where do you find the buoyancy to go on?”\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{87} Wittstock.
Chapter 4: Challenges in Analysis

This research process has raised numerous questions for me. Advocates for survivors of sexual assault would probably argue that positively affecting one audience member’s life is reason enough to produce survivor’s theatre, as evidenced by anecdote and audience response. However, any organization or event that claims advocacy as its central purpose is subject to a critical examination of its overall effectiveness. And if you cannot measure this effectiveness, how can you really determine the overall importance of a production as advocacy? I will admit my own bias when I say that I personally do not find numbers or statistics to have much effect on my own work as an advocate. Certainly though, this issue points to a need for research specifically focused on data collection over a large range of advocacy theatre which would allow for some comparison of efficacy rates.

Secondly, I have encountered an interesting issue regarding autobiographical information in many of these performance texts. As an example, Thompson has stated that the majority of Breaking the Current is based on her real-life experiences but that some details have been changed. While the focus of this document has not been to determine which facts are true and which fictionalized, it is an important point. As a playwright-survivor, Thompson is not alone in this. While some pieces are more literally translated from reality to the stage (A Shot Away, U.S.A, 2011), others are based on experiences and stories (Ncamisa!, 2010). Speculatively, we might say that certain details lend themselves better to a dramatization. Or it may be possible that changing or
withholding details of a traumatic event is part of a survivor’s understandable desire to remain emotionally safe enough to share their story. One the one hand, all advocacy theatre must have some level of artificiality simply because it is a real experience translated into an unreal space. Even if details are not changed, they are often interpreted differently in drama (through choreography, music, poetry, design elements, etc.). One would not say that this was disingenuous but simply necessary artistic license. However, researching critically, we must ask an impossible question: what does the fictionalization of reality do when there is an appearance of autobiography accepted by audience members? In other words, if we believe that we are hearing a survivor’s story, and parts of it are untrue, does it in any way negate the authenticity of survivor’s theatre as a tool of advocacy? My instinct is to say that it does not but I feel this is still a crucial area in need of further examination. I’ll echo Anna Deveare Smith when she argues in her essay, *Art and the Real World*:

‘What’s the difference between art and reality?’ … How we live, and how we treat one another, is what is at issue…. Art is more than a representation of life…. Art should communicate to an increasing circle of strangers—people who do not know the artist, but come to know the work, and through the work, come to know something about the humanity of the artist that rings with their own humanity.  

Throughout the research process, my first reading of Jeanine Thompson’s performance text has remained with me. Besides the many characteristics it shares with other advocacy theatre and its unique melding of physical and textual embodiment of survival, I was deeply affected by Thompson’s frank descriptions of the desire and struggle to survive trauma. In some ways, *Breaking the Current* seems to read not like a

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road map or how-to-guide, but like a love letter from a survivor to a survivor, as if someone might pick up this unpublished script and thumbing through it, notice the final, hopeful set of stage directions:

Absorption, anger, rage, realize my battle is with my memory and how I choose to go forward in my life – wholly. I step backwards through the hopscotch reclaiming my childhood. With circling gestures, I embrace the cycle of my life reclaiming my womanhood. With lying still on the ground, I begin to trust a calm sense of serenity...I sit up, smile, I’m in a new place.\(^{89}\)

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Appendix A: Interview I with Jeanine Thompson

10/13/10

JEANINE: Jeanine Thompson, uh, movement theatre specialist, associate professor at Ohio State University.

ELIZABETH: Jeanine, can you talk about what started you on your theatrical journey? What came first, theatre or dance?

JEANINE: Dance came first. I started at, um, Virginia Tanner’s dance studio in Salt Lake City, Utah. She was one of the innovators of, um, children’s creative dance so as compared to, um, being in a traditional dance studio where you’re learning how to replicate steps, you, she – she was teaching you was more about how to read a poem or read a story or go outside and look at nature and then create a dance based on what we saw or felt and it was story-telling. And we did learn movement, so it was more modern dance type of school than, rather than tap, jazz and ballet. Um, and that was my beginning. And then when I was, um, in junior high, I started studying theatre and acting and in high school I was fortunate enough to go to a high school that had a very strong theatre program and dance program. And uh, focused a lot of my time there. And I went to the University of Utah in their modern dance department and their theatre department. Went there for four years, completed my majors but, uh, I didn’t do any general ed.

(ELIZABETH and JEANINE laugh.)

JEANINE: One reason being is that I was on scholarship…

ELIZABETH: Okay.
JEANINE: And, um, I – I was having diffi- well, I had great difficulty in traditional education process. One, because I moved so much a part of my life that I – there was no consistency in my education.

ELIZABETH: Mm…

JEANINE: Um, so I really learned how to memorize instead of learning material so that made traditional education very difficult. Um, but also when I was an undergraduate student, um, at Utah, they – I was in English 101. They-I was having difficulty. They put me in the remedial English class, still having difficulty. They gave me a private tutor. And he was the one who said that they’re developing a test for dyslexia and “I think you have that.”

ELIZABETH: Mm…

JEANINE: But that was at a time when I was done (laugh) with education. And I started getting contracts to work professionally so I didn’t finish my- my degree. I just started to work as a dancer, an actor, and then with a company that, called Dance Theatre Coalition, who – and I believe they’re still in existence in Salt Lake – who, uh, we worked to bring together dance and theatre. And that was one of my main interests in, as an undergrad, is ‘How can I utilize elements of theatre in my dancing to more clearly express thought and emotion and story? And character? And with theatre, how can I utilize my movement knowledge to (pause) really utilize all that your whole body as an instrument for acting? And whether it be realistic or abstract to…Like I remember when I was, um, this is a professional gig, uh, but I – or maybe it was when I was still a student, it coulda been. (Clears throat.) I was performing Karen in The Children’s Hour.

ELIZABETH: (gasp)

JEANINE: And I…

ELIZABETH: One of my favorite plays.
JEANINE: And it - Mine too. And I remember my feet became such an important element of my character. And I’d never thought about it before then but I haven’t thought of anything less than my whole body since then.

ELIZABETH: Mm…

JEANINE: Then in, um, 1985, I met Marcel Marceau and was invited to, uh, his workshop in Ann Arbor, Michigan and then, by that time I had moved to Ohio to work as the acting dance instructor at the Goldston School for Mime. And, which is, which was in re – well, the school is still here – in residence at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Um, started working with Marceau in ’86. We started producing him in ’86 until he passed in 2007. There at the mime school and then also here at OSU when I came on faculty here.

ELIZABETH: And when did you come on faculty here?


ELIZABETH: Okay. Well, you’ve kind of answered part of the question, ‘What training have you received in theatre and dance?’” Um, do you feel like there were any other influences, you’ve mentioned Tanner and you’ve mentioned Marceau. Um, any other particular influences, in terms of dance training or, or acting training?

JEANINE: Um, yeah. There, there was one of my first acting teachers at Utah, Charlene Letson, and African-American actress, uh, she was very pivotal. And Ken Washington. He was me at Utah. He was their movement specialist but he was also, he also, uh, choreographed in dance and he directed plays and he wrote plays. Um, so he – he, in many ways, was (clears throat) who I identified with and he was one of the few people that didn’t tell me to specialize, to choose either dance or theatre. Because it came down to, I was doing two majors and before I was entering my senior year, um, I was in the acting emphasis program. I was brought in and, you know, they said, ‘You have to choose.’ And so did the dance department. And I chose the dance department at that time. Cause I was performing in their dance company and I just felt like I could continue acting on my own. But to continue with the training and the guest artists that were coming in…

ELIZABETH: Mm…
JEANINE: Was more important for me.

ELIZABETH: Where did you receive your MFA? Was that…?

JEANINE: I – I finished my undergrad work here at OSU.

ELIZABETH: Okay.

JEANINE: In order to go into the master’s degree program.

(JEANINE and ELIZABETH laugh)

ELIZABETH: (laughing) Motivation?

JEANINE: Yeah, yeah. It was actually Karen Bell. Uh, she was the, assis – like head of undergraduate studies in the dance department at the time.

ELIZABETH: Mm-hm.

JEANINE: And Dennis Thompson. Uh, of the, um, oh, I can’t think of his official term, or title, but he deals with, uh, all undergraduate credit issues. And they allowed more transfer and life – life experience credits than they had ever allowed before.

ELIZABETH: Wow.

JEANINE: So, because I still needed to go and take, you know, like Psychology 101 and Anthropology 101. But actually, you know, going back in my thirties…

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed it. I was ready to do it, wanted to wrap my brain around it. And, um, what, what – what brought me to that point was, to go back to get my degree, was I had been on the road for a number of years, touring and doing residencies and I felt like I had spent ten years prior to that really developing myself artistically. But I – I came from a poor family. You know, uh, it – I had, my family was helping me out to the degree that they could but I knew that I had to spend the next ten years shoring myself up financially. So that’s when I decided to go back and get my degree and try to look at,
look for, uh, teaching positions where I could root myself more and develop my artistry from being rooted.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: Rather than on the road constantly. So Vickie Blaine, who was the chair of the dance department at OSU at the time, knew me as a professional artist. She made me an offer I couldn’t refuse but along with that, I had to (laughing) get my undergraduate degree!

(JEANINE and ELIZABETH laughing)

JEANINE: So Karen made, Karen and Dennis made miracles happen.

ELIZABETH: You, you do have a heavy background in mime, dance and movement training. How does this influence your process in devising a new work? It’s a complicated question.

JEANINE: But not at all! That’s a great question. Um, this, this is one reason why I got this job. And one reason why so many people hire me. It’s because I didn’t do what everyone was telling me to do as, as a young adult, well, in my undergraduate, which is just specializing. And there’s one is that gives you a certain focus and I’m sh – and, and finesse. Which, I’m sure I compromised. But what I gained was a – a vast knowledge of how to utilize my whole body to express thought and emotion and character and story. Um, (pause), so when I work on a piece, I – I feel like I have, like, twenty different bags around me in the studio. And when I think of an idea, I, I – I feel like I can go over to this bag and I can draw upon seeing this artist or having worked with this artist and knowing this technique that can help, help elicit, bring out this – this idea. But I can also go over here and work theme and variation. And – and by working from multiple options instead of just knowing I need to write a text and stand and deliver it. That’s how I work. I think, ‘What is the best modality for expressing this thought and emotion?’ (Pause) Is that – that the correct use of the word ‘modality?’

ELIZABETH: Yeah. I believe so. I like, I like the word.
JEANINE: Great.

ELIZABETH: Making a note.

JEANINE: Words, um, words and me are often far apart so…

ELIZABETH: (laughs)

JEANINE: If, you may find that you need to clarify some of those.

ELIZABETH: Well, we can always go back and clarify. I’ll transcribe it this week and then we can go back if I, I may say, ‘And how do you spell that?’

JEANINE: And it may not be a real word. (Laughs)

ELIZABETH: Okay. Well, modality – modality is a real word, I promise. (Laughs) I promise it’s a real word. Um, so this kind of leads into this, this is a big – this is a big question. I don’t know if it’s an answerable question, entirely. But how would you describe your artistic philosophy?

(Long pause)

JEANINE: My passion is creating work that passes our intellectual understanding and goes to the heart.

(Long pause)

JEANINE: And I like as an artist to be able to draw upon whatever means necessary to do that in the best way with the idea at hand.

(Pause)

JEANINE: One of my greatest teachers of this idea was Marcel Marceau. Because within the art of mime, it is all about getting to the essence of the movement, the essence of the thought or emotion or character. So it’s – it’s a process of distillation. And another great aspect of mime is that it speaks universally. So you don’t have to be from a certain culture and a certain age in order to get it, to feel it. But it can, it can speak to any gender, and to anyone from around the world.
JEANINE: I also like to teach people to be able to, or to be part of my artistic philosophy is also teaching. And that is to…

(Long pause)

JEANINE: Uplift the student’s own artistic vision. (Pause) And with all that I know and little bits and pieces that I learn along the way, like with you and the women’s circus today. I like – not like – it is a passion of mine to help them find their own way of expressing their artistic vision. But since I come at it from so many different ways, I feel like I’m able to understand and communicate to a variety of people ways that they can uplift, develop, and then send forward their artistic vision.

(Long pause)

JEANINE: I think that’s why I’m sought out as a coach. For, for a variety of people. Is my keen ability to just be with a person in the room, sense what their needs are. *Their* needs, not what I think they need to do, which is a very different agenda. And to be able to communicate with them, with one, a variety of knowledge, a variety of skill sets, and a variety of vocabulary. I see that as sometimes the only thing that’s missing in helping with this transaction of mastery is ‘Do we have a shared vocabulary?’ And coming from a variety of training and background, my vocabulary is, is much greater than someone who is a specialist.

ELIZABETH: Anything you want to add to that?

JEANINE: Nope. Would you like me to clarify anything else in regards to artistic vision? Or philosophy?

ELIZABETH: If you had to choose three words, verbs, as goals as an artist, what would they be?

JEANINE: (Laughs) I – I thought of three *words*.

ELIZABETH: Okay.
UNINTELLIGIBLE.

ELIZABETH: Okay.

JEANINE: Then, as far as verbs, I would say, “Touch, inspire, uplift.” (Pause) And “touch,” I don’t mean literal “touch,” so there might be a better word than “touch.”

ELIZABETH: Do you want to think about it and come back to it?

JEANINE: Maybe. Can you think of another word? Or does touch qualify any theory?

ELIZABETH: It’s an emotional word.

JEANINE: Great.

ELIZABETH: I think it’s an emotional word.

JEANINE: Because we are looking at it as a verb.

ELIZABETH: Yes, yes. (Laughter) Yes. I know what you meant by “touch.” Touch. Sense of connection? Is that – is that…?

JEANINE: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH: What you’re driving at with the idea of touch? Uh, alright, this will probably be the last question for today…

JEANINE: Oh, are we already there? Oh, wow.

ELIZABETH: So this is…these are, um, two words, uh, or phrases. I’m interested in what they mean to you. This is kind of a two-part question. But, um, what do the phrases, “social change” and “advocacy” mean to you?

JEANINE: The essence of life.

ELIZABETH: Okay.

JEANINE: Being a woman, I am a devout feminist. That doesn’t mean that I am for women and against men. It’s that I understand the challenges that women face in so many
aspects of their life and no matter who is, uh, beaten down for whatever reason, political, gender, financial, cultural, sexual orientation, that is where my automatic inkling goes to. And it has since I was a kid. I think it’s because I moved around all the time. I went to six schools by the time I finished second grade.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: And then we continued to move every year, year and a half, after that. And, um, so I was always the new kid, I—I felt the judgment and having to go through the—the gauntlet of being accepted, getting accepted. Um, I was the kid on the outside looking in so I could also see dynamics of—group dynamics of bullying and, you know, those who were in power and those who were—who didn’t have the power. Um, so I—it’s interesting, I never put those two together, that that is maybe why I have the empathy for political action that I do. Um, and that goes hand in hand with advocacy. Um, being an advocate for—for those who, who either have a voice who need support or for those who don’t have a voice, who aren’t strong enough to—to be their own voice for whatever reason. Um…(pause) and, and then from my own life, uh, I was, uh, I don’t know if this is where I should tell the story…

ELIZABETH: You can tell the story here…if you want to…

JEANINE: Okay.

ELIZABETH: Or if you want to wait, we can record it next time. Whatever makes you feel comfortable. We can touch on it here and come back to it, too.

JEANINE: So in, in…oh, geez, I can’t remember the year. Maybe like ’74 or something like that, um, I was stalked by a serial killer and, um, he broke into our house and I woke up to him, uh, strangling me and with a chloroform mask over my face. And I thought I was dreaming. And I—I was laying on my stomach and I tried to push myself up and I was pushed back down. And he said, “Do exactly as I say. We have a gun to your parents’ head. And it will go off if you don’t.” And, again, I thought I was dreaming. And he repeated it and continued to strangle me. And he proceeded to rape me. In my bed. With my mom and step-father upstairs. And…I—I, as I’ve heard other survivors, it’s as if
I went out of my body and I was above, looking down on it, on the situation. And eventually, I was a born-again Christian at the time, and I started asking him about, “What do you think God thinks of what you’re doing?” And (laugh), eventually, oh, oh! Well, the reason why I started asking that was he kept asking me to be—kept telling me, you know, “Be quiet, be quiet.” So I realized that there probably wasn’t someone up there with a gun to my mom and step-father’s head so I started to be more proactive. So I started talking to him. Well, “started talking to him,” kinda like this is going on for, you know, half an hour. It wasn’t. But…

ELIZABETH: Maybe it felt like that.

JEANINE: (Laugh) Yeah. Um, and he got up! And he said, he got off of me and he said that, uh, “I don’t know if God could ever forgive me but could you?” And he then reached towards me, but down, onto the ground and picked up an axe. And he said, “I’ve been following you for the past two weeks and I was planning on killing you.” And he got up, walked out of my room, walked out of the basement, apparently walked across the rocks in our backyard, hopped over the fence, and he was gone. He ended up coming back the next night. This time we had our doors locked. And I heard him try the doors and they were locked and he left. He was picked up within a relatively short period of time on a cheap burglar charge, which the police said that he was trying to get caught. He was known by the name, uh, Gordon Lane, the Gordon Lane Rapist in Salt Lake City, Utah. And he had—he raped and murdered, they don’t know how many people. And I ended up going to trial. I was one of three people who would go and testify. And the youngest person. I think I was 15 or 16 at the time. So that’s, that’s a whole other aspect of advocacy that is—or that, I would say, is the central point of advocacy for me. And that is pivotal to why and—and how I came about creating “Breaking the Current” or “Ms. Toad’s Wild Ride Through the Twists and Turns of a Psychedelic Journey Called Life.”

ELIZABETH: So if you had to take the verb…

JEANINE: Mm-hmm.

ELIZABETH: “To advocate,” what would that look like?
JEANINE: What would it look like?

ELIZABETH: What would that, someone saying, “I need you to advocate on my behalf…”

JEANINE: I would…look like me picking them up, putting them on my back, and doing this to whatever is in front of me.

ELIZABETH: Jeanine is lifting her hand out in front of her. She’s got a hand behind her, swooping them onto her back. Is that an accurate description?

JEANINE: Mm-hmm. And I’m putting the other hand out…

ELIZABETH: The other hand is—is outstretched in front of her to—to protect?

JEANINE: To protect. To get out of the way. A little to get out of the way. So this (the hand behind her) is protect and that’s (the hand in front of her, palm pushed outwards) “get out of the way.”

ELIZABETH: Is this a good place to stop for today?

JEANINE: Sure.
Appendix B: Interview II with Jeanine Thompson

11/15/10

ELIZABETH: Uh, it is November 15, 2010. And I am here with Jeanine Thompson. This is our second interview. Uh, well, let’s see. We kind of stopped about the time we were talking about the inspiration for “Breaking the Current.” Um, so my next question—we kind of touched on this before but have any artists working today or in the past particularly influenced your development or performance of “Breaking the Current,” either stylistically or thematically?

JEANINE: Marcel Marceau, in the way that he—he tells stories, both in a traditional narrative style and in a very abstract style. Um, when I was studying at the American Conservatory Theatre of San Francisco, *For Colored Girls* was doing their first tour. And we got passes to that. And I went and saw that, I-I don’t know how many times I got to sit in that theatre and watch that show. But that—that show really inspired me into doing dance theatre, movement theatre work. And how to—that *it is* possible to tell a story with your entire body. And to be able to go from being more of a literal character to then transforming into being a very lyrical, abstract character. And there being a through line. Tandy Beal. It’s funny, um, most of the people were either in dance or theatre but there weren’t a lot of people doing what I was wanting to do with bringing it all together. John Giffen. Uh, the—his work that I’ve done was dance theatre as far as me being a specific story and expressing it through a variety of different ways. But as far as the theme…*For Colored Girls*.

ELIZABETH: Were there any particularly important parts of *Colored Girls* for you? I mean, moments in that show that stick out to you as something that—an image you held onto or an idea?
JEANINE: Yeah. Uh, there’s this one story where there’s this woman who is negotiating with her boyfriend or husband who ends up grabbing her children, he’s abusive and ends up grabbing her children and is holding them out the window. And he drops them. And, you know, it’s just the woman on the stage, recounting this story. But the way that it’s written, which is very poetic, and the way that it was performed was much more lyrical. That’s what hit my heart. I think if it would have been done in a different way, it—I—I would have edited it, and it would have landed differently in my brain. But because of its lyricism and its poetry, its essential nature, it went straight to my heart. And there’s many scenes from that original show—I haven’t seen the movie, yet—but that—that really impacted. Um, there’s also a story about a prostitute who, uh, cries herself to sleep. And she climbs in the tub and she’s like doing this ritual of cleansing herself off of all these men. And then she gets into bed and she cries herself to sleep. You know, so she seems like she’s in control, in control, but then you realize, no, it’s an act. It’s her way of trying to get through. And I’ll keep thinking.

ELIZABETH: Alright.

JEANINE: I’m sure there must be more…

ELIZABETH: Sure…

JEANINE: That have [unintelligible] me. Or inspired me.

ELIZABETH: Inspired...Yeah, yeah, keep thinking. If you want to add to that at any point, interrupt me. Uh, can you talk about the process of writing the text for “Breaking the Current?” Cause, at one point, a long time ago, you had mentioned that you started more with the text…

JEANINE: Yes.

ELIZABETH: …this time and that was different for you? Is that true?

JEANINE: Yeah, yeah. I’ve never started a piece by writing it first. And I would start, usually, by finding music that, um, inspired me to invent something that was—the first impulse was to the music. And then I would follow with whatever story went in my
brain. So it wasn’t necessarily the story of the music but the music seemed to always be the stepping point. This, I knew that I wanted to write about, about my life and about survival. I knew that I wanted to—I knew that I had stories to tell. Some were fun. Some were sad. But the main thread, throughout all of it, that I can see now at this point in my life was survival. Survival skills. That through the course of trauma and challenges, I have learned ways and survival skills. Whether it was out in the woods, avalanche training the dog or being stalked and assaulted. Survival skills.

ELIZABETH: So when you began to write the text, do you remember a theme that you started with, a moment? Did you start at the beginning and it stayed that way, chronologically? Or, I mean, do you remember that, at all?

JEANINE: I think I—I think I may have started with, um, avalanche training dogs. Because I’ve—I’ve told that story a number of times, same as I’ve told the story of, of the assault a number of times. And I think we may have talked about um, what was it, uh, like “survivor speak.”

ELIZABETH: Mm-hmm.

JEANINE: Did we talk about that last time…

ELIZABETH: Yes.

JEANINE: …how, uh, people tend to get into a tone and almost like a-a disassociation from what they’re saying. Uh, so I knew that there—that I had patterns of telling some of the stories and I started with those. The re—the telling of, of the assault, um, I think that may have come later. And you know, I have, I don’t know if I gave you, but I have different versions of the script so we can look at, you know, what-what came early, what came later.

ELIZABETH: Sure. I do have your binder with some of the drafts with notes.

JEANINE: Oh, great!

ELIZABETH: I have questions for you next time. About facts and looking through all that.
JEANINE: So that’s kind of how it started. I-I outlined what were the stories I wanted to
tell. And, then I just started writing. And then, uh, some I set up writing like, uh, “Saving
Linda from Drowning.” And I wanted to do it physically in a way that I did not, at the
time, have the skills to do. Such as, deliver that text in a lyrical way while doing Marcel’s
“Water.” And that, in and of itself, is so difficult to maintain. A sense of being in the
water. But to do that while delivering the text and being able to go in and out of illusion, I
kind of set that up as a, uh, a learning opportunity.

ELIZABETH: What year did you begin writing “Breaking the Current”?

JEANINE: (looks at framed poster from “Breaking the Current” hanging in her office)
What year is that poster?

ELIZABETH: Uh, it’s the 1998-1999 Season.

JEANINE: 1998-99? Then it was probably ’97. ’97, ’98. I believe I started writing it the
spring before it opened. A year.

ELIZABETH: Okay. You talked about, uh, the process of writing it. And now I’m losing
my train of thought but there—you said something that I wanted to touch on. I’ll come
back to it.

JEANINE: Okay. Do you want to ask questions, try to get your thinking back?

ELIZABETH: Sure, sure. Uh, when you talk about the—well, oh, oh, I know! Did you—
when you, I mean—I’m hearing that maybe when you started out, you knew this was
going to be a play. I mean, is that true? Or was it…?

JEANINE: Yes. A play instead of a dance.

ELIZABETH: A play instead of a dance.

JEANINE: Yes.

ELIZABETH: And you knew that this was going to be performative when you started
writing this—this…?
JEANINE: Yes.

ELIZABETH: Okay.

JEANINE: I knew this was not journaling.

ELIZABETH: Okay. So that’s an important—do you feel that’s an important distinction? For you?

JEANINE: It was for me. Um, I knew that I was ready to—I knew that I was ready to put all of the stories out there. And to see how and if they link up and how, how to share survival ability. Survivability. Out of these challenges. I knew that not everyone could relate to every story but I figured that a number of people could relate to something. And I’ve had people respond to my work, especially a piece called, “The Images of Woman.” And people have seen so many different things in this very abstract sort of metamorphosa, style of—it’s a mime piece. Um, and sexual assault survivors, um, many different people have seen what they needed or wanted to see in this piece. And I knew that I wanted to develop a piece that also had that universal effect, specifically on women, um, that could—that they could identify with and that they could see the possibility of surviving.

ELIZABETH: Can you talk about the process of the development of the choreography of the play?

JEANINE: Good question. That was kind of the fun part. Um, that’s where I’m used to living, is living in space and time. But to live in pen, pencil to paper, was an exciting new thing. But once I got something written down, I would then get up on my feet and find a physicality. And through playing with it, sometimes I would have an idea of, um, what—whether I wanted action happening with it, um…and sometimes I would set it up, like with the water. I knew that I wanted to attain a certain quality when I was delivering it and sometimes there were pieces of choreography that were spliced in, in between, that served as the response to something or the set-up for something. Such as, um, the dance to the Bob Dylan music. That is one of the most heartbreaking sections for me. For me, it’s remembering being molested as a child and it’s as if a woman is doing—or a
young girl—is- is dancing with someone. And you’re close but they start to take it somewhere else. And how you are struggling with “But this should be okay. This should be safe. This should be fine.” And someone else takes it to another place.
Appendix C: Interview III with Jeanine Thompson

11/24/10

ELIZABETH: It is 11/24/2010, Wednesday, approximately 10:30 something AM. This is the third interview. So the question was, what are your favorite moments in “Breaking the Current” and why?

JEANINE: One of my most cherished moments is the opening with me breaking through the, um, Ms. Toad’s head and coming down the slide in the Red Flyer with the aviator glasses and helmet on. Um, and that whole first section because it made the audience laugh. And that was—it’s always surprising that I can be humorous. And I have had the privilege of doing a few wonderful comedic roles but usually I’m cast in, and cast myself in, much more dramatic roles. So that was a treat. To know that I could do that. It worked. The audience responded very well to it. Uh, another part that was my favorite was when I talk about the assault. I didn’t know what in the world I was going to do to that—do with that section. I knew it was going to be in there from the very beginning. I didn’t want it to be anywhere near like, uh, a realistic representation of it, of what happened. And I kept starting lying down. And it—it just—it was too much for me and I didn’t want it to be too much for the audience. And so I looked at it in one rehearsal. I just said, “Think of a composition assignment.” And in some of the movements I had been doing, um, there were three movements that I really liked, that I thought expressed something about it. And I ended up working with just those three movements and varied it with timing and pauses. And I called it, “The Three Position Exercise.” So that section from then on, I didn’t call it the “Assault Section.” I called it “Three Position Exercise.” And it became a haiku for me. And I’m really, really glad how that turned out. That and—the sequence of that going into “Silent Scream,” then going into the, um, gestural, uh, study of-of, um, what happened between then and through the trial. And some people may get that section. Some people may not. It certainly echoes, um, trying to move
forward from that. But the gestures were based on looking at, um, photos in the police book, um, swearing in or talking about how I saw his face or the outline of a person. Um, of swearing in for the testimony. Uh, and then how, even through-throughout all of that, this was still strangling me, the thoughts of it were—still had me by the throat. Um, and the lighting designer who was um, Carrie Cox, did this beautiful series of pools that I walked through during this gestural phrase, of gestures based on those events. And then ended with this-this back arch of like, trying to get, you know [here, she demonstrates], if I couldn’t get over or around, maybe I would go under this memory and how it had me by the throat and try to emerge, swim under it and that’s what took me into, um, the “Saving Linda from Drowning.” That-that, choreographically, that sequence, I love. I think that that was like the hardest nut to write about and I knew that that was kind of the basic reason why I was doing the show but, um, I’m really proud of how I was able to find it, artistically. To speak in a way that could not only touch people’s minds, but really move people’s hearts. And that it was abstract enough to not be too graphic to—for people to step back. I was hoping they would lean forward [she leans forward]. And I—when I went from the Bob Dylan dance into stabbing the bag with the snow or cocaine falling down. I loved stabbing that and being buried in that snow and then coming out of it. I- I loved that. And I love that whole final choreographic section of how it was a bit of a reprise of the whole piece.

ELIZABETH: Yeah. You mentioned that, um, that not necessarily everyone will get that bit, particularly of the gestures going through the trial, not everyone will get that. Is it important that people understand what that is?

JEANINE: I think they have an idea of what it could be. I think the majority of what my feedback is that people did get that because of the way that I did it. Not just what I did but the way that I did it. Um, but others saw it as some important transition from telling someone, standing up somehow for myself. No matter how god-awful. And there—I didn’t demonstrate any god-awful, you know? It was, the only moment was in that silent scream. Everything else was cool. And I think that juxtaposed with what the audience was hearing, with the—me telling the story of the assault. Then this beautiful, um, aria set up a wonderful dramatic tension that I hope shares what I wanted to share.
ELIZABETH: What did you want to share?

(Long pause)

JEANINE: Ultimately, what I wanted to share was how in our lives we all have, uh, like major accidents, you know, things that happen to us. Whether it’s our doing or someone else doing something to us. And that we can, given the action that we take, we can move forward. We can learn and grow. And it’s not that things—that we forget, which is what that whole last dance is about. It’s not that I’m forgetting about any of these things. It’s just that I’m learning how to process it. I’m learning how to see that, you know, when I’m lying on that ground, I can either be devastated or—and feel, uh, completely, uh, decimated. Uh, or I can feel whole. And just include those parts. And try to heal the connective tissue in between. And that’s really what my whole life has been about, is trying to heal the connective tissue. Physically and psychologically. And with activism. Whenever I do the performance or I’m talking and doing [unintelligible] as an artist, whether they’ve seen this piece or not, I talk about, um, having been raped and stalked and the importance of people-taking action to not sit alone and, and let that eat you alive. To reach out, to know you’re not the only one and to know that there are systems to help you. And whether it’s, um, sexual abuse as a child or molestation or assault as an adult. Um, and the way that you end up dealing with which aren’t so healthy, which is through drugs and alcohol. And disassociation. From other people and your own emotions. That’s normal. But we’re not taught that. But it’s normal for those people who have experienced that [sexual trauma]. And that is an important part of me, who I am as an artist, as a feminist, and as someone who speaks to others about my work and what I value.

ELIZABETH: You answered some of my other questions further down here. That’s good. You talked about the aria. So, maybe a little bit broader, what role did sound and music play in the development of the piece?

JEANINE: That’s usually where I start. With it, with creation. I usually start with the music. This time I started with text. And I listened to music for a year. I’m a music whore. (Laughs) I go to libraries and I just, I-I-I pick up a bunch of those CDs and listen
to them. I love listening to the radio. And I always have a pen and paper with me for when I hear something on the radio then I’ll go look for it. Uh, or if I hear something in a restaurant, I’ll (laughs) go and ask them, “What are they playing?” Um, so I found—I found pieces of music that I thought were perfect for either underscoring what I had written or that helped me create the synapse in between one piece to another.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: And I didn’t know what I needed in those places until the piece was really starting to get—maybe three quarters of the way or even more—done. The transitions were one of the last things that I knew what to do about. And that’s where music really played a role. I also had a composer who was working with me. Um, Todd Harvey.

ELIZABETH: It’s probably in one of the programs.

JEANINE: Yeah. Yeah. Um, and he-he was fabulous. And even—he was a wonderful collaborator. I would let him know what I needed and he would come back. And he would—he was open to me tweaking it. And I even went into the sound studio with him and tweaked some of the key moments of howling or children singing mixed together. But he created a number of beautiful soundscapes. And edited my choices so that the sound swirled beautifully. The sound was just as present as the set. And I absolutely loved the set. Absolutely loved it.

ELIZABETH: So talk about that.

JEANINE: The set, Dan Gray created it and um, he made this—this huge Ms. Toad with this big, kind of circus freak show scary scale of smile that I—and this tongue that went down this ramp that I would slide down and climb upon. And then he painted the floor as clouds. So it was, it was, uh, as if I was in the clouds in the sky, um, never-never land. Um, and he—we found this simple, yet wonderful way of breaking the bag of cocaine and so that I could have control of it. Um, rather than some, you know, some big machine, you know, some other power descending this. No, it was me. Um…
ELIZABETH: That was an important element, not just in terms of practical stuff, stage business—but do you think that that was important for you as Sarah Toad in the story?

JEANINE: Absolutely.

ELIZABETH: To have control?

JEANINE: To have control of that. To be able to show what I had control of and what I didn’t have control of. And how I reacted and responded.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: Yeah. That was—that’s a very key, important notion of this story. Where you have control, where you don’t have control. And how can you survive it. That’s the most important thing. How can you survive…this? [Suddenly occurring to her] Another favorite part of mine is the story of avalanche training the dogs. (Laughs).

ELIZABETH: That’s the funniest part.

JEANINE: Yeah. I absolutely love that. I think that one—that I can do as a piece in and of itself and have done that and the “Saving Lynda from Drowning” section. I’ve done that.

ELIZABETH: Yeah, I’ve seen that.

JEANINE: That’s right, yeah!

ELIZABETH: Yes. I feel like there was another question I was going to ask you about the avalanche training. It’s escaping me but I’ll come back to it. One more question for today. Well, this is a big question so we’ll make this one the last one. Can you take us through the major steps in the process? Like if you had to have a verb for each step or a sentence, say, “I had to do this, I had to this, I had to this” and then there’s the play. Do you think you could sort of say something like that?

JEANINE: Mm-hm. Um, I need to first work on the writing of it, of the primary stories that I wanted in there. So I made a list of those and then wrote them out. Um, and then I worked to see how I would physicalize the stories. You know, would some be abstract?
Was I feel that some of them would be abstract, some would be realistic, some would be voiceover, um, some would be dance… And then I—at the same time of starting to physicalize it, I was listening to music. All the time. And—and just seeing, you know, what I thought was evocative. And, interestingly, a lot of stuff I came across I didn’t use. But it was very inspiring for my process. And that was a lot of, uh, very non-pop David Bowie but the darker side of David Bowie. And Tom Waits. And I rarely listen to Tom Waits. Or this darker side of Bowie. But it—I-I listened to that. And I don’t know, maybe it allowed me to get to voicing a darker side. It allowed me to see beauty, in a beautiful way of expressing violence, tragedy. You know, and it’s not that it was lovely, you know, like a lovely opera. Um, it was beautiful in the integrity and that, in the way—in the edginess, in the-in the point—in the way that it was done. And that, looking at the music and listening to music and looking at how I structured the piece overall. Um, you know, from beginning, middle, climax and end. Um, the progression of it all, uh, really, that music, I think, really inspire me more than I realize. Until right now. But none of it made it into the show. It just fed my process.

ELIZABETH: Mm-hm.

JEANINE: Um, and then, all throughout this, I worked with all of my designers and dramaturg. Um, I would do showings for them. I did showings for every draft of the piece. And they would give me feedback on what they thought worked, what they thought didn’t work. Um, what they thought was effective and needed to be—may not be working now but continue in that vein—no, don’t do this, at all. (Laughs.) Like there was this one time where I was singing in an early draft a Paul Simon song, a Simon and Garfunkel song of, um, “Bookends.”

ELIZABETH: Oh, yeah!

JEANINE: And that was too—one, I’m not a beautiful singer but it was also getting to be a bit too sappy. (Laughs.) There’s a better word than sappy.

ELIZABETH: What was it evoking that it wasn’t supposed to?
JEANINE: Oh, um… (long pause) something—it—I was wanting to express love and loss but through that song, it took people away from my story and it took it to their story that they had attached to that music.

ELIZABETH: Mm.

JEANINE: And to their familiarity with it. And so that—that was a removal and it was—it was much lighter and familiar than what I wanted. And I thought that was also, it could have just been that I sang it horribly and they—(Laughs.) But I think that the crux of it was that. And that’s, uh, that’s an important thing to consider when you’re using music is its influence.

ELIZABETH: Its connotation.

JEANINE: So I continued with drafts. And then eventually, once I had, uh, a piece staged, most of the transitions, and a lot of, the majority of the music—so that was a process of almost a year in development with my collaborators. Um, then I brought it an outside director which I’ve never done on my solo work before. And that was Sue [unintelligible] Rowlands [sic]. And she helped to fine-tune my performance of the material. And you know, volume checks and things like that. And most importantly, when we added tech. Because you can never see yourself. However, I did have a wonderful student, um, I believe it was Wendy Bagger. She came in. She was one of my advanced movement students. And she came in, and she had blocked out the entire show! In-in watching rehearsals and she could get up there and do a rough sketch of everything so I could sit out and watch her do it. Yeah. So, it was through working with her and running the piece to get my stamina and to arrive at a sense of how the piece would flow, in and of each section, and the piece as a whole, that the piece came together. So I would say that—that would be my process.