

From Solitary to Solidarity: Unravelling the Ligatures of Ashley Smith

Research History

The work on this project began with a dramaturgy class in the fall term of 2011. The major research project for Drama 301, the Drama program's only production dramaturgy class, was to investigate the story of Ashley Smith.

The focus of Drama 301 is to introduce students to the work of a professional dramaturge; each time I teach this course I try to make their research relevant and challenging by focusing the main project on a subject that is current, usually local, and difficult to understand. Students are encouraged to think about – and experiment with – how different approaches to dramaturgical practice taught in the course may be applied to this research problem, offering insight and various ways to approach and interpret the subject, and their response to it; my hope is that in so doing they may understand how theatre *works* as an effective and vital cultural medium.

The students of Drama 301 created production dramaturgy casebooks based on hypothetical production plans for an intermedia performance based on the incarceration and suicide of Ashley Smith (research foci included: History of Corrections Canada, Carcerality and Society, The Body of the Prisoner, Technology and Death, as well as Mental Health and Incarceration).

Why Ashley Smith?:

In the summer of 2011, I came across Hana Gartner's award-winning investigation into the death of Ashley Smith on the CBC's *Fifth Estate* program. Gartner's report on Ashley's death really affected me for at least three reasons. First, Ashley's life ended in my community; she died in The Grand Valley Institute for Women, in Kitchener, the city where I live. Second, she was a teenager, and in some respects she was no different from my two teenage sons or the teenagers who I teach at the University of Waterloo. I can't really stress this enough; as a father and teacher of teenagers who are about Ashley's age, I was deeply affected by Gartner's coverage of Ashley's tragic death. The video documentation that Gartner fought Corrections Canada to release for public scrutiny was a disturbing depiction of a mentally ill teenager being repeatedly punished for her bad behaviour. While on many levels these videos of Ashley Smith are disturbing viewing, for me it was particularly so because in each of these troubling scenarios I recognized glimpses of teenagers in my own life. Finally, over the eleven years I have taught at the University of Waterloo, I have witnessed an increasing number of students who are suffering from mental health issues. I wonder about how universities are similar to prisons in Canada for the way they struggle to address the mental health of those within their walls of operation.

Devised Theatre:

The work on this project continued with a second class that happened in the fall term of 2013. Entitled *Devised Theatre: The Roots and the Shadow of Performance*, the course offered a practical and theoretical introduction to devised theatre. For the purposes of this course, devised theatre was defined as performance creation from means and materials other than a play script. The course offered a practical examination of a variety of contemporary practitioners of devised theatre; while the context and approaches to creation of the artists studied differ, all were seen to challenge traditional notions of how identity, language, the body, and place are represented in performance.

In addition to introducing students to a variety of devising theatre practices, this course was a development lab for a multi-media performance that would become *From Solitary to Solidarity*. All reading, writing, research, and the development of practical exercises into performances done in the class became foundational material for *From Solitary to Solidarity*. At the end of the course, students had the choice of whether or not they wanted to continue working on the project in the winter term.

Why Devised Theatre?

This approach to theatre creation is particularly good at challenging conventional ways of creating theatre; that is, creation processes that tend to place tremendous importance on the authorial 'voice' in the script upon which the entire live production is usually based, as it provides the 'blue print' for the live event. Devised theatre can be generated from a variety of resources, from the body, to a particular location, or an object, to some music, film, video, or other stimulus. Often this freeing up of the creative process allows for a variety of other elements of performance to be questioned, evaluated, or re-examined. For example, notions of how identity, language, the body, and place are represented in performance are often key subjects of examination in devised theatre. This was a particularly good style of creation to use in *From Solitary to Solidarity* for a couple of reasons: first, our knowledge of Ashley Smith was coming from a variety of sources: video, print media, social media, etc., so through practices of devising theatre we could draw upon many of these, and used them as resources for creating the final performance.

Also, the process of creating devised theatre is collaborative in a manner not often experienced in more conventional theatre creation models. Devising processes usually entail a more thorough exploration of the creative relationship between those creating the performance, and thus a deeper exploration of the particular dynamics, mechanics, effects and distinct ways of knowing that are generated by the dialogical exchange in this process, whether it is between artists, artists and non-artists, or artists and environments. Collaboration in this context involves the development of strategies to facilitate understanding and

inspiration across cultures, expectations, traditional understandings and behaviours. This consciousness is then applied to the work in that we question the ways we operate with content that is foreign to us. We develop techniques to enable a greater sense of participation and opportunities for engagement, which hopefully generate new ways of relating to and talking about difference - particularly ways that resist reification, possession, appropriation, or nostalgia.

Ideally, the collaborative process for creating performance is the beginning of developing tools to help build 'architectures' of co-reliance, trust, and respect between artists, and between the artists and the broader community. The performance (the outcome of this process) may allow collaborators to explore the ramifications of shared / multiple authorship; they may explore various ways to maintain and sustain what is necessary to keep collaboration engaged, while allowing all participants to develop strategies for critiquing the process. Finally, collaboration differs from collective creation, which has a long and proud tradition in Canadian theatre history. In my reading of this subject, collectivity is grounded on the desire for absolute communion, commonality and consensus. In contrast, collaboration is open to disagreement, conflict, contradiction and difference; the focus is negotiation and trust. Collaboration promotes a dynamic of reciprocal openness, a willingness to be affected. The goal of collaboration in my work is to develop dialogical strategies and promote dialogical processes.

Auto-ethnography:

Another conceptual framework that governed how we approached the story of Ashley Smith is that of auto-ethnography. The auto-ethnographic method we have focused on in this project is mostly concerned with self-narrative, or autobiographical voice, placed within a particular cultural and political context. Tami Spry recognizes auto-ethnography as "the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial 'I' to an existential 'we'." And, thus, auto-ethnography is a way of examining how our multiple layers of experience connect us all.

Auto-ethnography recognizes that knowledge is subjective and deeply connected to the knower, but Norman K. Denzin states that auto-ethnography also possesses a sort of bifurcated gaze; that is a way of looking inward at the self, while maintaining an outward gaze and awareness of the larger context of cultural experience where self experiences occur.

One of the goals of auto-ethnography as it has been applied to *From Solitary to Solidarity* is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathetic process of inquiry in which we may be conscious – we can feel in our bodies – the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience.

Assignments and Photo-Documentation:

Drama 301 assignment:

Drama 301: Dramaturgical Analysis *Understanding How Theatre 'Works'*

Production Dramaturgy Assignment: *Dying on the Inside*

Overall Assignment Description:

You are to create a production dramaturgy casebook (protocol) and a protocol presentation. Your casebook is a documentation of your research for the development of a UWaterloo Drama production of an intermedia performance based on the incarceration and suicide of Ashley Smith; your protocol presentation will be a performative realization of some aspect of your research, intended to be used in the creation of the production and/or the production program and/or the website and/or other support that you dream up for the production.

Production Dramaturgy Casebook (Protocol):

The purpose of the casebook is to provide a medium wherein you, the dramaturge, can record your process of analysis, reflection, and research as well as the results and creative insights engendered by the process. Its organization should reflect an evolving dramaturgical process that serves this particular production well, and it should demonstrate the dramaturge's effort to assimilate the course's theoretical and methodological readings into a practical approach to dramaturgy that will provide research material that effectively serves the director, the production team, and/or the audience.

The organization of your casebook should most likely be chronological with journal-like entries as well as visual material and more formal commentary on relevant topics, but you are encouraged to be creative in the content, format, and presentation of your casebook so long as it addresses the basic content requirements. All research materials – visual and written – should be fully documented and listed in a bibliography. Each casebook will contain a variety of material specific to the process of the particular dramaturge, but all casebooks should include the following:

Production Dramaturgy Areas of Research:

Your Casebook research should focus on one of the following areas of research:

Corrections Canada – History and the Here and Now:

Consider the Grand Valley Institution for Women and / or any of the other correctional facilities that held Ashley Smith. What are the pros and cons to of this system? What is the history of incarcerating women in Canada? Have we progressed? Think about how this research relates to you, and why it might be important to this project.

Carcerality and Society:

Consider the role that incarceration plays in society. How can we understand Corrections Canada through a political, human rights, feminist, or other critical lens? How do certain approaches to the legal system create outcomes such as the death of Ashley Smith? If you weren't aware of Smith's story before this class, think about why. Are Canadians ignorant of prisons and how they are run? How might what happened to Ashley Smith be part of a bigger problem?

The Body of the Prisoner:

Think about how incarceration affects the body of the prisoner. Consider how time spent in prison is played out as a unique form of performance. How can a theatre artist know the psychological and psychosomatic effects of incarceration on the body of a prisoner? How might research into the effects of durational types of performance on the body of the performer provide insight into what you have learned about the effects of incarceration on the body?

Technology and Death:

Research the connection between technology and death. How is the effect of someone's death altered when it has been recorded on video? Consider the role of technology in what we know about Ashley Smith, her life, her family, and her time in various prisons, etc.

Mental Health and Incarceration:

Research the relationship between mental health care and the prison system in Canada. Are an increasing number of incarcerated people suffering from mental health issues, and what is the link here between breaking the law and mental health? Is suicide a growing problem in correctional facilities?

Performance:

Is incarceration a kind of performance? How are prisons a kind of performance space? Research how prisons and correctional facilities could be realized as a form of performance, or how we might understand the culture of incarceration as a performance that we can analyze and better understand through a dramaturgical lens.

If none of the above areas of research appeal to you, make up your own. Pitch me a research idea by Tuesday October 18, 2011.

The Following are the two main assignments for the Devising Theatre class, where the focus was both learning how to devise theatre as well as how best to approach the subject of Ashley Smith.

The first assignment focused on the students performing their 'origins', or in other words, an auto-ethnographic approach to performance, and the second – which developed from this first assignment – was focused on each student's relationship to Ashley Smith.

Assignment 1:

Drama 490: Devising Theatre
The Roots and the Shadow of Performance

**The Roots and the Shadow of the Self –
The Course Reader Performance**

The Introduction

With a partner you are to create a ten-to-fifteen minute performance exploring your origins (see Barba) through animation of your body, a text, and space. Your choice of animation should be explicitly drawn from one or more of the articles in the course reader. Your presentation should also reflect the practices of working with the body, text, and space explored in the class workshops. On the day of presentation, your group will be expected to provide an artists' statement to the rest of the class as a way of introducing your work.

The Procedure and The Dates

The creation of your performance should happen along the following lines:

Your Origins: With your partner you are to decide on a particular pairing of your origin texts (e.g.: family with education, place with family, or any combination you want). These should be texts with which you have a deep connection.

The Conceptual Framework: You will then brainstorm which concepts, perspectives, or approaches to performance examined or expressed in the articles from the course reader will be the most appropriate to the exploration of your chosen origin texts. Essentially this is your conceptual framework for the animation of the self.

The Practices of Animation: You will then decide which of the practices explored in the class discussions and workshops will best facilitate the animation of your origins through your chosen conceptual framework. (N.B.: It's a good idea to have several of these – from the class, past experience, or of your own invention – to draw upon and play with.)

Preliminary Viewing: In class on Tuesday, October 8th and Thursday, October 10th, your group will come to class with a preliminary version of your performance. This class will be an opportunity to work with me to refine and develop your work. At this point, I will set certain challenges for you to consider and work on concerning the clarity and precision of how you've combined the above elements.

Refinement: Your group will then refine your presentation based on the feedback you received from the preliminary viewing, and be prepared to perform for final evaluation in class, on either Tuesday, October 15th or Thursday, October 17th.

Artists' Statement: During this process your group will prepare an artists' statement of approximately 500 words that will provide an introduction as well as some insight into your presentation and the process you underwent in order to create it. (N.B.: A more detailed outline of the Artists' Statement will be provided in class on Tuesday, October 1st.)

The Location

Your group's presentation can happen in any location on campus that you wish, provided that you have gained prior consent and an agreement of term of use from whomever is in charge of the site.

The Evaluation

Your presentation is worth 25% of your final mark. (N.B.: The artists' statement will be worth 5% of this evaluation.)

The Questions?

Call 519.888.4567 (x37029) or e-mail: houston@uwaterloo.ca

Assignment 2:

Drama 490: Devising Theatre ***The Roots and the Shadow of Performance***

Small Acts of Repair – Performances in Solidarity with Ashley Smith

The Introduction

With a small group or on your own, you are to create a performance of approximately 15 minutes exploring some aspect of your identity as a uWaterloo student in relation to the incarceration and death of Ashley Smith. This performance should be devised using techniques and strategies from either Goat Island or the Wooster Group. Ashley Smith's story should serve as a resource for

your performance; however, for the purposes of this assignment, you can take a certain amount of artistic license with this content. Your performance site should be somewhere on campus, and should also serve as a resource for your performance. Your use of the body in performance, to animate the text and site, should be drawn from the articles in the course reader and your experiences of practical exercises in the class. The relationship between your performance, site, and your spectators should draw on the final articles in the course reader (Conquergood, Bourriaud, Fitzpatrick, and Harpin). On the day of the performance, each group will be expected to present a First Aid Guide introducing your performance (to be handed out to your spectators), and following your performance, you will be expected to submit a brief commentary about your performance (Aftermath Account) that will address what worked or didn't work, and what might be advanced from your work toward the winter term production.

The Procedure

The creation of your performance should happen along the following lines:

Ashley Smith: On your own, or in a group, you are to decide on a particular aspect of the Ashley Smith story that will serve as a focus of your devised performance. This source material may take many forms; it might be from media reportage (video, audio, press), it might be from the current inquiry (texts, statistics, expert opinion, social media commentary), it might be from material generated during her life (quotes from her or her family), etc. This material will become a resource that you then begin to animate. Animation should be done principally in the style of either Goat Island or the Wooster Group, and it will essentially be the way in which you turn this material into an action or event, and it can occur using a combination of many elements; such as: dialogue, monologue, libretto, dance, installation, song, etc.

The Site: You will then choose a site that will contribute an additional dimension to your animation of the Ashley Smith material. As such, the site will be considered a second resource employed to further animate your relationship to Ashley as a uWaterloo student. The site will alter the context of your material from Smith, it should affect the shape and feel of your animation of Smith's story that in some way is a response to the final articles in the course reader (Conquergood, Bourriaud, Fitzpatrick, and Harpin). Following these articles, your site should offer a particular environment in which you want your spectators to experience your work. David George reminds us that the etymological origin of the word "experience" is to put to the test. Consider how your site might create a framework in which your work may be put to the test by an audience.

The Conceptual Frameworks of Repair: Brainstorm which concepts, perspectives, or practices examined or expressed in either the work of Goat Island or the Wooster Group (in the course reader) that best apply to material you want to animate from Ashley Smith, and the site wherein you want to perform. Essentially this is your conceptual framework for a small act of repair of the traumatic story of Ashley Smith – as it relates to you as a student at uWaterloo and your site on campus.

Performances: The performances will happen during class time on Tuesday, November 19th and Thursday, November 21st. You will have significant class time between now and these dates to work on your performance; similar to the Course Reader Performances, I will spend time with you in your site, providing feedback on the development of your work.

The First Aid Guide: You or your group must find a simple and engaging way to introduce how your performance is an enactment of repair concerning the trauma and trouble of the Ashley Smith story. Your First Aid Guide might also introduce us to the best way to experience your performance, to guide us in the experience of your work. All First Aid Guides must be ready and circulated at or before your performance; the approximate length of this document is 250 words. (N.B.: A more detailed outline of The First Aid Guide requirement will be provided in class on Tuesday, November 5th.)

The Aftermath Account: You are to write an Aftermath Account of how you thought the performance turned out, and identify anything in the work that you think might advance to the winter term production. This document should be approximately 1500 words, and it is to be completed individually. (N.B.: A more detailed outline of the Aftermath Account requirement will be provided in class on Tuesday, November 5th.)

The Location

You should have decided on your site by no later than the beginning of class on Thursday, November 7th, so I may make up a schedule listing times and locations.

The Schedule

Your performance will happen during class time on November 19th and 21st.

The Evaluation

Your performance is worth 35% of your final mark. (N.B.: The First Aid Guide will be worth 5% of this evaluation and the Aftermath Account will be worth 10%.)

The Questions?

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