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*Research Article*

**A Space to Speak: Therapeutic Theater to Address Gender-Based Violence**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the experience of eight graduate students in the drama therapy program at Lesley University when creating and performing a theater piece centered around gender-based violence. The performance piece, *A Space to Speak*, used the performers’ real-life stories to highlight their vastly different, yet strikingly similar, experiences and invited the audience to examine their own relationship to those stories. A description of the process used to create and perform the piece is followed by a discussion of the impact the process had on the performers and audience members.

**Keywords**

gender-based violence, therapeutic theater, drama therapy, performance, devised theater, performance ethnography

The theater stage has the power to elevate and share hidden stories that challenge cul-tural norms, oppression, and suffering. This was the case for a project that grew out of a university course on performance-based drama therapy with the theme of gender-based violence. This article will outline the process of creating a performance piece based on a group’s experiences of gender-based violence and will share the experi-ences of the group members throughout the process of creating and sharing the piece.

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To lift up survivors of sexual assault, activist Tarana Burke (2018) began a mission in 2006 that would be reignited in 2017. The #MeToo movement (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Edwards, 2017) inspired many people to come forward with their stories of trauma, abuse, harassment, intimidation, and assault. The surge of people speaking up has led, to date, to the removal of several long-time perpetrators of sexual violence. More broadly, it ignited a cultural shift. Where previously survivors had suf-fered in isolated silence to avoid shame or penalty, people began to feel empowered, heard, and validated.

Even in an evolving world where horrific stories are shared and believed, the under-lying traumatic impact caused by sexual assault remains. Survivors, whether or not they choose to tell others of their experiences, continue living in a patriarchal society where their oppressors often avoid consequences. In the performance piece *A Space to* *Speak*, eight actors considered examples of abuse and assault as well as gender-basedcultural norms that sustain the silence. Previously unspoken trauma from stories of violence seeped into the performance piece, bearing witness to the audience. Both the audience members and actors experienced visceral reactions in the shared space of the stage. Immersed in the emotional gravity of the performance, some experienced a transformative catharsis (Scheff, 2007) in their connection.

This project, which was developed by eight drama therapy students, also served as a learning experience. The creation of *A Space to Speak* follows the gravitas of the #MeToo movement and contributed to the Violence Against Women Initiative at Lesley University. This article describes the sojourn of the team of students as they step onto the stage, telling their own stories of gendered vulnerabilities and survived trauma. It provides an overview of the drama therapy process, which included bring-ing the group together, creating the piece, and supporting two public performances with different audiences. The lived experience of the performers is also explored, par-ticularly in relationship to working with emotionally activating themes of gender-based violence through a dramatic medium.

**Performance-Based Drama Therapy**

As context for the project, it is important to have a sense of drama therapy and its potential to address traumatic experiences. Drama therapy is the use of drama and theater in therapeutic settings to facilitate change. There are many ways that individual drama therapists may approach their work, several of which involve theatrical perfor-mance. Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson (2016) describe theatrical performance in two categories: therapeutic and nontherapeutic. Therapeutic theater intentionally creates performances that can narrate and validate participants’ stories (Jones, 2007; Salas, 2005; Snow et al., 2017), reveal new insights and understandings about the performer or group to others (Landy, 1997; Pendzik, 1994; Snow et al., 2017), and reveal insights to the performers about themselves (Casson, 1997; Pendzik, 1994). Nontherapeutic performance may also deliver therapeutic benefits to performers and audience, but that is not the main intention. Within therapeutic performance, actors develop characters and perform in-role. There, they have the potential to discover something new about

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themselves through their characters and through the act of performing in front of an audience with others (Bailey, 2009; Landy, 1997). Audiences may learn, become inspired, or find connection with others through educational or social justice–oriented performances (Salas, 2005; Snow et al., 2017). Within drama therapy, this therapeutic process is intentionally harnessed for individual transformation, often to work through trauma.

*The Playspace*

Both therapeutic and nontherapeutic theatrical performances happen in a playspace: a transitional place that is within, but separate from, real life, creating a heightened dra-matic reality (Pendzik, 2006). This may be a formal stage, or it may even be the center of a circle created by a group gathering together virtually anywhere. In the theater, actors and witnesses interact in this playspace, where anything is possible. A person’s imagination allows a stage to become a city street, a hotel loft, a hospital emergency room, or any other setting. Pendzik (1994) suggested that audiences suspend their disbelief instinctively when engaging with performance: “In regular space this would not be plausible; on stage it seems perfectly normal. . . . We came to believe the stage has no limitations, as container of the cosmos” (p. 28). Here, in this heightened reality, both actors’ and audiences’ subconscious minds dance and expand. It is a platform where big stories of transformation, trauma, larger-than-life hurdles, pain, and suffer-ing can be told and witnessed. Here is where the “sacred and healing” (Pendzik, 1994, p. 29) combine to foster visceral emotional connections between and among perform-ers and witnesses. Even further, audiences may feel like their story is being told as well, which may help them feel more connected to peers or strangers and less isolated in their struggle (Jones, 2007; Pendzik, 1994; Salas, 2005).

*The Players*

Bailey (2009) wrote that by reviewing and reframing a part of one’s life to create a piece of theater, participants take memories and make them into new stories. In a sense, by telling one’s own stories, a person encounters their experiences again, but in a different way. Through the editing and dramaturgical processes, as well as by adding an audience as witnesses, those narratives can transform perspectives on, and relation-ships with, past stories and traumas. This internal transformation can happen either in front of the audience as the play is performed, or off stage as the writer considers how their performance may differ from the narrative they have told themselves in the past.

Through a group creation process, individuals arrive to the playspace with their own ideas and biases. Together, they are tasked with combining their stories into a coherent piece of theater. In the devising and editing processes, the individual stories become a shared group experience. This sharing experience can be particularly pro-found when working with issues of trauma, such as gender-based violence. Following the experience, individuals leave a show with a reminder not only of what they brought to the table but also of their time spent in the group through the rehearsals, the shows,

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the roles they played, the lines they spoke, and the transformations they collectively experienced. Each performance-based drama therapy moment may have the capacity to resonate with a group member and influence their future encounters and future nar-rations of their trauma.

*The Witnesses*

The impact of a play may change depending on who is viewing it and in what context. Casson (1997) discussed ways the audience views different types of theater perfor-mances. In many cases, audiences have a passive role where their task is just to watch. Performance-based drama therapy looks at the audience as active participants in a dynamic dialectic, acknowledging the audience’s impact on the performers as well as the performers’ impact on the audience. The content of an audience’s own struggles, their relationships to the performers, and their associations to a play’s themes affect how a performance is experienced. For example, if a group of female survivors of domestic violence perform for a community audience composed of members of the general public who opted to come and see it of their own volition, their motivations and connections to the stories shared would be different than if their audience were close friends, family, and others who already know them (or think they do). Such a shift in audience can change the experience for performers and audiences alike, as well as the conversation after the show is over. Audience members each have their own perspective, and in watching a performance, they may identify with or begin to understand something in a new way. Scheff (2007) wrote about this as a basic function of human connection: “Society is possible . . . because humans can momentarily take the viewpoint of the other” (p. 108). This phenomenon is substan-tially heightened in the theater.

The presence of an audience may allow performers to expand past stereotypical stories of oppression and open up a dialogue about more nuanced, individualized experiences. Through performance-based drama therapy work, the narrative an audi-ence hears does not belong to a disembodied voice; it belongs to the individual in front of them with a personal story to tell. This can heighten the impact on both performers and audiences. Salas (2005) shared how using Playback Theater, a performance-based drama approach, helped teach middle school preteens about bullying and changed the way the classmates interacted with one another after the experience. After their experi-ence with Playback Theater, those who were considered bullies were apologetic for their behavior and were able to notice and validate the hurt they caused. Snow et al. (2017) shared how a drama therapy performance group of adults with Down’s syn-drome evaluated their impact on the audience’s knowledge and attitudes. By undertak-ing a creative performance process and sharing it on a stage, performers may hope to be better understood by themselves and by an audience. As Stephenson (2016) wrote, “knowledge is imparted and the stranger becomes less strange” (p. 217). By telling stories of gender-based violence through performance, the conversation is elevated, presenting the complexities to an audience and potentially inspiring further sharing and inquiry around the issue.

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Using a performance-based drama therapy framework, this performance explored one way to devise a cohesive piece of theater with a theme of gender-based violence, integrating many individual and personal stories. Lesley University Drama Therapy graduate students asked the following: How can audiences be engaged with complex contemporary issues such as gender-based violence through theater? How does the process of creating and performing a performance-based theater piece about violence against women affect performers? And, how does this experience shape learning for future work in drama therapy? With these guiding principles in mind, the performance *A Space to Speak* began to take shape.

***A Space to Speak*: The Process**

As mentioned, this performance came out of a project at Lesley University within a graduate course on performance-based drama therapy. Within the course, students cre-ated solo performance pieces around the theme of gender, reflecting a diverse array of experiences. Many of the pieces took a deep dive into the variety of ways aggression and violence can manifest in the lives of women (with “women” being defined in broad and inclusive terms to include issues related to nonbinary, trans, gender-queer, femmes, etc.). The classroom experience proved to be profound, and many students were inspired to continue the exploration. Following the course, this work was devel-oped further to be presented as part of a university-wide initiative and conference, Violence Against Women: Representations, Interpretations, Explorations/Education. Along with this Lesley Conference, the performance was also shared at the North American Drama Therapy Association’s (NADTA) annual conference. This provided two different audiences for the performance: one composed of classmates, instructors, and other conference attendees from various backgrounds, and the other of fellow drama therapists from North America.

*Performance Creation*

After the course, with a new goal in mind of creating a more substantial piece of the-ater, the group engaged in various steps to create and prepare the performance. This section will briefly describe the process used to devise the eventual piece of theater.

*Devising.* This piece was created over a 5-month period, during which the group metfor nine face-to-face sessions as well as additional individual and small group work. To begin the devising process, all performers met to discuss the project, speak about possible formats for the piece, and establish norms within the group such as respecting everyone’s stories and taking responsibility for one’s own well-being (through per-sonal therapy and self-care practices). The group also acknowledged that this piece would not be an attempt to encapsulate all experiences of gender-based violence; rather, it would address the stories and realities of the eight group members.

Movement, improvisation, and writing were some of the main methods used throughout the devising process to generate themes, increase the participants’ ability

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to act as an ensemble, and facilitate the telling of complex stories related to gender-based violence. Two specific exercises that helped move the devising process along included the writing of one-sentence stories and a movement exercise (Grotowski, 2002). Jerzy Grotowski’s psychophysical theater style focuses on presence in the dra-matic space—both being present within yourself in the moment and being present with the other ensemble members in the space. It also emphasizes ritual and group dynamic, exploring ways to keep a performance alive and fresh while staying within a repeat-able framework. The movement exercises build group cohesion, shared exploration, and structured ensemble-devising methods.

The group’s Grotowski-based exercise consisted of the performers walking through the rehearsal space and focusing on the presence and spatial balance of other perform-ers. This united the performers as a cohesive group, helping them attune to one another. It also helped achieve balance within the group, which would prepare performers for exploring their own stories of gender-based violence and holding space for others to do the same. Eventually, group members were invited to speak aloud the themes that resonated with them. When one person felt ready to do so, they could stop and speak a sentence or phrase pertaining to their own experience with gender-based violence, and everyone else in the group would freeze and focus on them. As the pace quickened and more statements were spoken aloud (e.g., “I hate that I feel so anxious anytime I’m walking alone at night”; “I said I’m sorry, but I’m not”), individuals in the group began to have strong responses to the emotions in the room. For one participant, the emotion culminated in them leaving the room for a brief break without telling the others, who wondered: “Should we follow? Is what we are doing ok? How do we handle this if we aren’t doing therapy right now? Is this therapy? Where is the line?” Once the member returned, together the group explored the structures needed to maintain a productive and safe-enough space. The questions and answers that came up because of this moment deepened the group experience and highlighted the complexities of exploring the topic of gender-based violence, which affects group members in complex and painful ways. Themes such as fear, indignation, and frequent apology resonated across the group during this exercise and the subsequent group processing. By the end of the exercise, there was a developing rhythm of telling stories and being witnessed by one another in the moment. This was getting closer to the ultimate goal: a heartfelt, devised but not contrived, script.

After the sentences and phrases spoken during the exercise proved to be so power-ful, each performer brought in three “one-sentence stories,” as they were called, to share with the group. Examples of the sentences brought in include: “She was remark-able, without trying . . . a shame she’ll never know”; “I just want to be believed”; “The worst violence you committed was making me feel as if I had no choice”; and “For high school graduation my mom got me a self-defense class.” It was a powerful expe-rience to share and hear stories in such a distilled way, and the group was very drawn to the use of these stories in the performance piece. To continue exploring, the sen-tences were put into a WordCloud, an online source that generates a visual depiction of which words are used most in any particular passage by showing them at different sizes (see Figure 1). This created a list of the most frequently used words across all the

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**Figure 1.** WordCloud comprised of the words used in group members’ one-sentencestories, with the size of the words indicating their frequency within the text.

one-sentence stories. These words were, believe(d), self, angry, normal, maybe, con-stantly, and try.

*Script development.* The group decided that crafting a script based on the themes andtext that had already been brought up through the devising process would help propel the creation of the piece. This task was taken on by two group members, who wrote the script and brought it in to the next rehearsal. The one-sentence stories created in rehearsal were used as a launching pad for the script. Overlaps were found between specific words and phrases within these sentences, which helped to begin the creation of a cohesive script. Below is an example of the framework; the italicized words indi-cate where two actors say the same word at the same time.

Performers 1 and 2: *Is it*

Performer 1: Safe

Performer 2: Alright

Performers 1 and 2: To be *angry*?

Performer 3: He got *angry*—he shouldn’t have to make me feel better when *he* was the one who was hurt.

Performer 4: If *he* asks you if you have a boyfriend, say yes. Always *yes*.

Performer 3: I said *yes*, and asked for more; I could *take* it.

Performer 1: *Take* this, you need it.

During the script-writing process, it was decided that time would be given for each individual to take the stage and tell their own story, in their own words, in their own performance style. Many of these were based on the stories that participants had

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created and brought in for the first rehearsal. Each performer had 2 min to tell their story however they wished, and these moments took many forms, from poetry and improvised dialogue to stand-up comedy and carefully rehearsed traditional mono-logues. Once all the monologues had been distributed throughout the script, the over-lapping dialogue based on the one-sentence stories was placed around them to create transitions and highlight themes. These monologues found their places within the script quite naturally; though they were vastly different, there were strikingly similar elements that were all held together by the framework. The example below shows how one performer transitioned into their monologue from a moment of full-group dialogue.

Performer 1: Well did he hit you?

Performer 2: He hit the wall, and the table, and the steering wheel and I just kept wishing for once you’d just fucking hit me and give me something real to show people.

[. . . tells story]

The topic of gender-based violence evoked deeply upsetting and sensitive reflec-tions in the performers and audience. To share these stories, the group developed ways to regulate their emotions that arose during the process. For example, as part of the staging of the performance, each group member selected a small, quiet task, such as crocheting, playing with a sensory toy, or sorting Tarot Cards. Performers utilized these tasks during the performance, which helped them regulate their expe-rience to give the emotional investment needed to tell their story without being overwhelmed by the power of the piece. The use of this “stage business,” as it came to be known by performers, was a method of finding aesthetic distance, “. . . char-acterized by emotional expression that is clarifying and relieving rather than obscuring and overwhelming . . .” (Landy, 1997, p. 367), for each performer. In other words, working toward this aesthetic distance was a way to access methods of grounding. Having tangible objects was beneficial for the performers because it helped them ground themselves while sharing activating stories related to gender-based violence.

The group remained flexible with the script right up until the performance, leaving room for modifications. This became important when, a week before the first perfor-mance, a performer realized that in its original form, her monologue would be difficult to share with an audience. As a last minute adaptation, a way was devised to have members of the group support her by breaking her story down into one-sentence pieces and reading them aloud as she stood facing the audience, physically and emotionally supported by her castmates. In the performance, she gave a brief introduction transpar-ently explaining the changes, saying,

I wrote a monologue, and I’m proud of it, but my own story is too heavy for me to carry right now . . . there is so much I wanted to say, but I cannot do it alone. So, my friends will be telling my story for me, because I believe it still needs to be shared.

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This is an example of how the group remained flexible and willing to adapt the piece due to the raw nature of its subject matter.

*Audience involvement.* To help reflect how gender-based violence is not simply a col-lection of stories but a societal pattern, part of the script included having the audience ask the performers preset questions through spectrograms. A spectrogram is an activity where participants are posed a question with two options (e.g., “least to most” or “sweet to salty”), two opposite sides of a room represent the options, and participants respond by standing somewhere between the two sides (i.e., along the spectrum; Gaines, Butler, & Holmwood, 2015). Within the context of the performance, the group wanted to involve the audience and create some purposeful discomfort for them and the performers to highlight the lived experience of the phenomenon. Ten spectrogram prompts were passed out to a handful of audience members who were asked to read them at given times during the performance. The prompts were designed to become incrementally more and more uncomfortable for the performers on stage. The prompts had varied “stakes”—some felt very safe, whereas others were difficult to answer, especially in front of an audience. For example, one “safer” prompt was, “Line up from curly hair to straight hair,” whereas a more difficult prompt asked participants to “Line up in the order of how many people you have had sex with.” The final spectro-gram prompt was, “Line up according to how many times you have been assaulted,” which led to an improvised discussion by the performers onstage about the definition of assault. Although this final question launched a heated, improvised discussion, the group found that two of the most difficult spectrogram questions to play out onstage were, “Line up in order of who is most likely to be hit on at a bar” and “Line up from best grades to worst grades.” These questions highlighted some of the subtle ways gender-based violence is experienced in American culture and how violence can mani-fest within groups of women (e.g., through judging one another on outward appear-ance or arbitrary achievements, which can affect an individual’s self-esteem and sense of value to society).

Gender-based violence is a broad issue, and the group was aware that their script only featured the eight stories they could tell. Although many audience members might be able to relate to the themes presented, many stories would inevitably be miss-ing from the final script. The group anticipated that it would be important to continue holding the space with the audience before returning to the “real world.” One group member led a postshow talkback to provide a reflective space for both the audience and the performers. She prepared questions to raise after the show in conversation, also leaving space for the audience to ask questions of their own. Realizing that the final piece might evoke personal stories and complex feelings from audience mem-bers, it was important to the performers that both the performers and audience mem-bers were able to share their thoughts on the shared experience.

The final piece was approximately 20 min long and left about 15 min for the talk-back. The staging for *A Space to Speak* was simple to be flexible for different settings. Group performers spread out, sitting on the floor or in chairs, and claimed a small area

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as their personal home base, particularly in the show’s opening and closing moments. For the talkback, all performers sat or stood closer to the audience and faced them to better engage in the discussion.

***A Space to Speak*: The Performances**

The piece was performed in two different settings: first at the annual conference of the NADTA and second at the Violence Against Women: Representations, Interpretations, Explorations/Education conference at Lesley University. Each performance had dis-tinct qualities and unique moments of learning and insight for the performers.

*NADTA, Kansas City*

The first performance took place in Kansas City, Missouri, at the NADTA annual con-ference. The performance was paired with a postperformance workshop to engage workshop participants in an active process of exploring the themes. The 3-hr work-shop was titled “A Space to Speak: Collecting Stories of Gender-Based Violence Through Performance.”

All the group members flew in from Boston to present to an audience of 30 drama therapists, students, and other members of the drama therapy community. The workshop took place in the main ballroom of a downtown hotel that was being used for the conference. It was a very large space with a small stage and 200 chairs facing it in rows. The large room also included the registration table, conference merchandise, and vendor booths. Throughout the performance, there were people coming in and out of the space at the other side of the room, signing in and convers-ing, which created a somewhat distracting space. As performers were anticipating a more intimate performance space for this piece, this sparked discomfort for some performers and was something the group had to overcome together. The setting not only is one of the exciting parts of therapeutic theater but also can be one of the most challenging.

To begin their workshop, the performers brought the audience members together in a circle for a round of introductions. One of the actors led the audience and performers through a warm-up exercise intended to center the group as a whole and bring them into a synchronized space to hold the themes of the performance. Following this warm-up, which reflected methods used among the performers during the devising process, came the performance piece of the workshop. Upon completing the piece, the performers asked audience members to write a one-sentence response to what they had witnessed. The purpose of this was to give the audience space to express some of the emotions they might have been carrying from witnessing a performance with heavy themes. In addition, the performers hoped this would be a good starting point for iden-tifying themes and topics for discussion during the talkback portion of the workshop. One group member then led the audience and actors through a de-roling exercise. In the drama therapy space, de-roling “. . . allows the client (and therapist) to return to a place of neutrality or to bring consciousness to changes evoked from stepping inside a

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‘different role’ experience” (Lassken, 2017, p. 167). For the purposes of this work-shop, the de-roling exercise was meant to help the audience and the performers arrive back into the present moment and into their own bodies, which was particularly impor-tant for those who may have been transported to memories of their own traumatic pasts. It was also helpful in beginning to integrate the information from the perfor-mance and move forward from a place of reflection to a place of action.

During the postperformance talkback, audience members were initially invited to share using a framework of “I saw . . . I felt . . .” to reflect on their experience. Many audience members talked about the “bravery” they perceived in the performers and mentioned moments of their own resonance with the theme. They were also curious about the process of putting the piece together and the performers’ experience through-out the development of the piece. Group members talked about their work together and highlighted how the group’s experience would inform their future work as drama therapists.

Following the talkback portion, participants were taken through some of the same devising techniques that were used to create the piece, encouraging the audience to engage with themes of gender-based violence. For example, a chair with a water bottle was placed in the center of the circle, and audience members were invited to walk in the space around the chair. At any point, the audience and ensemble were encouraged to pick up the water bottle to indicate that they wanted to share a thought or feeling the performance evoked for them. During the time someone held the water bottle, the rest of the group was encouraged to simply pause and give their attention before continu-ing to move through the space. Many audience members took the opportunity to express their reactions to the piece as well as communicate pieces of their own stories. People shared nonverbal, physical expressions of a range of emotions (e.g., anger, sad-ness, embarrassment, support). Some added words or phrases to express themselves, voicing themes such as gratitude for the #MeToo platform, refusal to remain silent, sadness connected to their unspoken experiences, and desire to support one another. The same audience members who seemed so limited and contained from the stage appeared to multiply as the workshop progressed. They milled about, filling the space, speaking up in concert with the performers, and relating to one another. At this time, performers felt connected to the audience through the shared stories and emotions, and it was an incredibly poignant section of the workshop. This experience highlights how sharing stories of gender-based violence can affect those witnessing, often urging them to share their own stories or hold onto an inward sense of community and valida-tion of their experiences.

To close, the group was brought back into a circle and led through another guided meditation meant to ground participants, sending a warm light up through the body. Members of the group, both audience and ensemble, were then invited to step into the middle of the circle and pose their body in a way that represented their experience dur-ing the workshop. The middle of the circle filled with various sculptures, and one ensemble member walked from individual to individual, tapping each person on the shoulder and asking them to give one word or sound to accompany their sculpture. Some people stood in relationship to others, joining fellow audience members and

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performers to express themes of togetherness and resilience; some posed alone in their reactions, crouched or turned away, demonstrating themes of isolation and enduring trauma. This provided a space for audience members to express emotions that came up during the workshop while still within the held group environment. Once everyone who wanted to had the chance to add voice to their body position, everyone returned to the circle to end the workshop. Through the questions and reactions of the audience, the performers were able to feel a sense of support and trust among relative strangers. Although the performance was written based on merely eight personal experiences with gender-based violence, the theme clearly resonated with the performers and audi-ence and took on a life of its own.

After the workshop was complete, the group of performers gathered over lunch to relax and debrief about the experiences and feelings elicited by the performance. The participants were able to read the one-sentence responses collected from audience members and discuss how those responses resonated with their own. As one member expressed, “Reading these comments makes me feel so grateful. They got it; they were listening and right there with us.” Just as the group gave space for audience members to de-role within the workshop, this was the group’s space to process the experience of sharing this vulnerable and sensitive personal material for the first time in front of an audience. Members talked about feeling a sense of relief for completing the workshop, feeling drained but supported, and appreciating having had an audience after so many months of working on the content in private. The members then parted ways, choosing their own forms of self-care in that moment. Some returned to the conference space to attend additional workshops, whereas others stepped back and did not return to the conference space for the rest of the day.

*Lesley University, Violence Against Women Conference*

The second performance of *A Space to Speak* took place at the Violence Against Women Conference, held at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and included an audience of roughly 30 individuals. As all performers attended Lesley University at the time of the workshop, the audience was mostly made up of familiar faces, including professors, classmates, and a few family members and friends. This made a striking contrast to the first performance of this piece, as the audience at the national conference was made up of drama therapists from across the country, many of whom were unfamiliar to the performers.

This pared-down, 1-hr presentation consisted of the 20-min performance, a de-rol-ing exercise, and a talkback with the audience. The group warm-up and devised work-shop from the NADTA conference were eliminated due to time constraints. The performance took place in a classroom, a smaller space than the first presentation, and the performers had a very limited amount of time to set up before beginning. This classroom was in close proximity to one of the rehearsal spaces that the group had previously used to practice, so there was less pressure and focus on adjusting to the performance space than there had been in Kansas City. However, given the familiarity of some of the audience members, many participants felt more intimidated by this

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performance and experienced a different sense of vulnerability, highlighting the impact that an audience can have on performers. Due to the personal content of the perfor-mance piece and the real possibility of performers interacting with the audience mem-bers in academic and social capacities following the performance, the energy during this presentation felt more heightened and tense. The quicker pace of this second per-formance experience may also have contributed to the performers’ nerves, as there was not as much time to allow for group connection and processing in the way that the three-and-a-half-hour workshop had permitted.

The Lesley presentation brought up many questions regarding the lines where per-sonal and professional cross and the shame that can come with telling stories of gen-der-based violence. Some performers wondered whether their friend/peer/partner/ teacher would look at them differently after knowing painful and revealing stories about them that they might not have chosen to tell outside of the performance. The group was reminded that even after choosing to offer up their own stories for witness, they did not ultimately have control over who would be witnessing and how those people would perceive their stories. Would their relationships shift and change by sharing? In comparison, although no less professional, the NADTA conference offered less intimacy because of both the larger performance space and the unfamiliar faces of audience members.

There were other distinctions between the two audiences. The questions asked by the Lesley audience took on a somewhat different tone than the first audience. Where the first audience was more interested in the drama therapy process leading to the performance and more open to sharing their own experiences around the theme, the second suggested ways to promote the “product,” for example, promoting it to bigger audiences or publishing the script for others to perform. In this rendition, the audience did not have the opportunity to divulge as many of their own reflections as the audi-ence in Kansas City; the format did not allow for the same workshopping and sharing. As one performer put it, she felt like she was collaborating with the first audience, although she felt the focus was more about putting on a performance with the second audience.

***A Space to Speak*: The Impact**

The ultimate impact on performers and audiences is difficult to gauge, but several things stand out from the participants’ experience and the feedback from the audi-ences, especially in regard to gender-based violence. First and foremost, the stories shared in the performance were deeply personal to each individual, and the importance of forming a cohesive group that consistently built trust through dynamic drama activ-ities was ever present. From the beginning, the group’s members navigated one another and the subject matter in an attempt to find a place of trust and freedom from which to take risks and share stories. The idea of creating a “safe enough” space to speak and tell stories was active throughout the experience, emphasizing the need for a process that could be flexible and meet the needs of each member in the various moments of the experience. At moments during the devising, rehearsal, and performances of the

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piece, the group members relied on one another to hold the space for sharing profound and painful stories of violence, aggression, and trauma. Performers reflected that although there was a measure of control in choosing to tell their story and in devising the script, they were not in control of others’ perceptions or reactions to their vulner-able confessions. It was their connection as a group that saw them through these moments. For example, when one group member was performing her monologue in Kansas City, she became more intensely emotional than she had in rehearsal. Members of the group noticed, and those nearest her instinctively diverged from set blocking to stand nearer to her, supporting her with silent physical contact as she finished her part.

As mentioned previously, one of the drama therapy tools that became most useful in navigating the emotional content was the concept of distancing. During the vari-ous phases of the experience, as well as in the creation and performance of the indi-vidual monologues, distancing techniques were used to find a place of aesthetic distance that allowed the depth of the emotional experience to be shared while still creating enough space for performers to not be overwhelmed by it. Tools for distanc-ing included the development of stage business for each performer, the occasional use of humor and heightened storytelling, and the incorporation of movement and group choreography. One performer remarked that having stage business during the performances gave her a tactile, somewhat impersonal, and grounding retreat after performing a monologue that had made her feel exposed in front of her invited friends and classmates. Another shared that having choreography and other planned performative measures gave her a framework that she could anticipate, even as unexpected emotional moments arose on stage.

From the group members’ point of view, one of the most surprising impacts was the influence of the two different audiences. Contrary to what might have been assumed, in general, the group found it easier to perform this piece in front of an audience of relative strangers at the NADTA conference than in front of an audience of peers, teachers, university colleagues, and friends at the Lesley conference. Having one’s story witnessed was powerful, but also carried with it the potential shame of being identified as the story and having the telling of the story dramatically transform how others related to the performers. One performer mentioned that her significant other checked in afterward, recognizing her personal facial expressions indicating stress that showed up during the performance; this demonstrates how the second, more familiar audience could be personally empathetic and responsive to the performers. Others remarked that they felt awkward facing professors and classmates who were in the audience—people whom they recognized and saw often but did not necessarily share friendships with. In addition, another member of the group felt as if they grew closer to classmates who witnessed the performance through conversations with them after-ward and through an exchange of experiences that carried on well after the perfor-mance was over. In summary, the increased familiarity with the Lesley audience had both positive and negative impacts on the performers.

The impact on the audiences is more difficult to assess, because aside from the talk back, there were only workshop evaluations to review. The broad shared reaction of the audiences was one of gratitude and appreciation for the sharing of stories. Several

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audience members mentioned to performers afterward their appreciation for having these stories told. Audience members at both performances also stated an appreciation for the moments of pause and centering in the piece and the way the performers also tended to the audience’s experience. It was clear that audience members had a strong resonance with the subject matter of gender-based violence, and that they were thank-ful for the opportunity to have a conversation after the performance. Through the per-formance, the witnessing audiences were able to reflect on their own experiences of gender-based violence and hear honest retellings of others’ stories.

Several audience members expressed a wish for the piece to continue to be perfor-maed, in order that it be shared more broadly and have a wider impact on gender-based violence. The performers, however, felt ready to let their performance go and move on from it. Although the purpose of devising and performing *A Space to Speak* was not established as that of a therapy group, it bore similarity to a therapeutic space in which performers had a chance to dive into their own material, uncover new under-standing, create a performance, and share it onstage. The creation and performance served the purpose of engaging with the topic and reframing some group members’ personal narratives over the course of the experience. By contrast, it was clear from audience feedback that after the performance, some audience members were still wrestling with themes and—perhaps not surprisingly—thinking of more stories that have not been told or of how other people might be inspired or moved by hearing the stories of others. However, after the final performance, the performance group mem-bers expressed a sense of feeling saturated with the topic themselves and a desire to move on to other projects now that they had, on some level, transformed their own relationships to the theme.

**Application to Future Practice**

The creation and performance of *A Space to Speak* were a collaborative process that drew on the personal experiences of its performers. It must be reiterated that this piece and project was in no way meant to encompass all experiences and expressions of gender-based violence; rather, it was a look at the experiences of eight female-identi-fying individuals studying drama therapy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although a wide variety of experiences existed within this group, the stories told in *A Space to* *Speak* were connected in many ways. Through the live performance of this piece, thestories expressed onstage were offered up for connection with the experiences of wit-nessing audience members. Based on the group’s experience, some recommendations can be made for future work.

The supportive rehearsal process and careful execution of this piece were impera-tive for creating a space where performers could tell their own stories. Through the drama activities, a supportive and collaborative environment was created between the group members, with the ultimate goal always being to respect and protect one anoth-er’s stories. Although creating the final performance piece was another major goal, as with all drama therapy, holding the security of each group member was paramount. Establishing these priorities is encouraged for any group looking to create similar

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work in the future. Gender-based violence, as the group experience revealed, is often a private, isolating experience; a person is made to feel powerless both to prevent their encounters and at fault for them. For a group to find their connection, they have to feel safe enough to speak up.

As mentioned, it was discovered that the creation of a final script was helpful in facilitating the devising process and holding the experience. At first, a less structured approach was taken, which relied mostly on open discussion, free writing, and move-ment work. Although these methods were important to the internal process, they were not sufficient for holding the powerful and activating stories that existed within the space. Once a script was written and brought to the table, a skeleton was available, inside of which individual monologues, movement, and spectrograms could be inserted. This script helped to create distance by making the play an external “object,” allowing participants to engage with it at a more manageable distance.

Creating a balance between showcasing group dialogue and showcasing individual moments was also important for this piece. As mentioned, *A Space to Speak* holds both individual experiences and group commonalities in relationship to gender-based vio-lence, and mirroring that in the script was important to the entire team. Allowing space for each performer to tell their story in the style they wanted helped communicate this dichotomy between individual and group to the audience. Having each individual monologue be written and directed by the individual whose story it was gave perform-ers control over their own stories and a sense of mastery over their experience. Although group members often sought feedback on their monologues, this feedback was not given unless requested. That balance of individual and group speech also seemed to mirror the experience of gender-based violence, which takes many forms while still being a universal experience.

The use of small distancing tasks by each performer, such as crocheting, painting fingernails, and sorting objects, was a successful theatrical and therapeutic choice that may be recommended for all looking to work with such personal material, as it gave the performers a place to focus and an activity to do to ground themselves at any point during the performance. As the performers returned from delivering emotional lines and monologues and picked up their tasks, these moments also gave the audience members a chance to feel, breathe, and begin integrating their own reactions to the stories of gender-based violence.

**Conclusion**

*A Space to Speak* demonstrates one way of using performance grounded in the tech-niques of drama therapy to deliver honest, reflective, and challenging messages to an audience about experiences of gender-based violence. The process of devising and presenting this piece proved to be powerful for those involved, with emphasis put on the need for a held rehearsal and performance environment. When comparing the two presentations of the piece—at the NADTA annual conference and Lesley University’s Violence Against Women conference—the makeup of the audience and the physical

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performance space affected the ensemble and the piece itself. This truly reflects what Casson (1997) writes: “It’s not only the performer but the audience that creates the artistic experience . . . a sending and receiving that goes back and forth continually during the performance. Every performance has a different chemistry” (p. 46).

*A Space to Speak* offers a contribution to the larger discourse on gender-based vio-lence. Although only representing the stories of its creators, the stage elevated and offered the piece up to audience members. The drama therapy container allowed par-ticipants to tell stories that were not always easy to tell; those who witnessed the per-formances felt empowered to engage in conversations, and even to share parts of their own experiences. In this instance, therapeutic theater helped transform private admis-sions into a public conversation about gender-based violence.

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