

Futures of Performance

The Responsibilities of Performing
Arts in Higher Education

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CALL OF THE BUTTERFLY

The Tao of Genuine Generosity

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I blame Nigerian actor Soibifaa Dokubo as the inspiration for this essay.

I went to Lagos to teach a class called Intro to Theater Production, where participants built “from what you already know from theatre, and deepen your relationship with character, text, emotional and personal truth, scene study, the body as storyteller, lighting design, sound design, and space design as it relates to performing and creating a night of performances for the gala.”

The first day set the tone: Nigerian summer’s day, air conditioning out; students overcame transportation transfer, bus muggings, and malaria to get to the workshop. Ramadan just began; I chose to fast to be clear minded in this new situation, and I started the class with some games and activities—fun!—to create ensemble.

There was a flow, joy! Friction started between younger and more elder actors. Elder actors demanded respect. I, in the middle of the fray, spoke to the eldest of the elders, Soibifaa Dokubo at the end of the first class. Mr. Dokubo, who has a lengthy resumé,¹ does not need to be taking any workshops. I said this to him in our discussion filled with tension and laughter. He was angry at the disrespect, but I told him that this class would be an ensemble-based process, so we were not doing things the same as in other theaters, and he could participate or not participate. There he stopped me with a smile and said, “No. I’ll stay. I want to see your Theater of Generosity. See how it works.”

Theater of Generosity. No one had ever described my process as that, but it felt good like iftar after a long sun-filled day in Nigeria. Dokubo kept repeating it, and the intention became mantra: Theater of Generosity. What would that be? A place where everyone is sappy and syrupy, like 1980s Smurfs, and all of Shakespeare is translated into Smurf language? Yuck.

Yet, I wanted to play with the feeling Dokubo gave me when he named my process for this essay. What is Theater of Generosity? Is that the best name for my desired play/performance-making space? How could that flow into an entire university? How could that change academia, the profession of theater and performance itself, or just everyday people?

To the Genuine and Beyond

I understand that I am not the first to declare Generosity as a foundation of a performance practice. There is a history of practitioners who focus on the liberatory possibility of theater and performance—from Agosto Boal to Liz Lerman to Peter Zazzali. My call for Generosity is not an attempt to be the Authority. I eschew the tradition of “the Authority,” to impose one style or philosophy or to claim an orthodoxy to codified, formulaic structures in attempts to create the Authentic. It is as if to be a part of a radical liberatory performance practice, all one needs is to quote some Boal, Freire, add in a little hooks and Spolin. In this way, any gesture of this structure becomes orthodoxy and thus un-liberates the participants into a blah blah blah of “ATM-ing”—spitting-out receipts to prove what the Master Teacher has deposited. This structure is counterintuitive to creating an experience as a space for play, or as I call it, a PlayFullSpace—a space where participants feel free yet rooted enough to take on the pain or joy that comes with risk-taking or seeking answers beyond their current understanding for their own or community’s mutual nourishment.

While a PlayFullSpace needs the ingredient of generosity to exist, I needed something to fully bring it to life—the word Genuine.

Genuine sits outside of The Authentic. The Authentic is authored, contrived, devised, and with steps that limit freedom, demands a perceived perfection derived from orthodoxy established by a hierarchical figure. My framing of GenuineGenerosity seeks to foreground the concept of genuine, which opens us to the possibility of a relation that can be messy, dynamic, difficult, derived from our differences, collisions. The Genuine is not easy to feel, create, or design.

To help me find the genuine, discuss it, create it, I start with the philosophical concept of zero—being nothing and everything—as an entry point to understanding. The arrival to the zero-relation, the zero-being is a constant in creating the genuine moment of relationship in performance or any space where one wants to build profound connection. To move toward this zero, the practitioner must tap into their generosity, be open and empathetic to themselves and others, and honor the wisdom of others to engender a playful spirit that respects the agonism and the dynamic validity of the PlayFullSpace where risk, danger, failure, inspiration, and joy all exist at the same time.

The genuine emanates from the root of the word in Arabic, Jinn—the third being, the magic—pointing toward a performance base where performers, designers, operators, all the system of people who make the performance, and audience seek transcendent relation to each other. Thus, Theater of Genuine Generosity (TOGG), at its root, establishes a space for people to seek kinship. Our differences. Messy, difficult. Genuine. Magic. This will elicit all range of emotions—not just elucidation or a high—something complex and indivisible.

I created TOGG for this moment, to conceptualize how to create an acting/performance style of no style. TOGG derives part of its spirit from Bruce Lee's (1975) the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* and from activist Grace Lee Boggs, who said: "Art can help us to envision the new cultural images we need to grow our souls" (Boggs, Kurashige, and Glover 2012, 38). Seeds of TOGG's essence stem from Chaos magician Phil Hine (1992, 9), who believes that "what is fundamental to magic is the actual doing of it—that like sex, no amount of theorising and intellectualisation can substitute for the actual experience[...] What symbol systems you wish to employ is a matter of choice, and that the webs of belief which surround them are means to an end, rather than ends in themselves."

The actual doing—of acting or performing—creates that Magic, and is what matters most. The system, the texts, the styles, while important, should not be what we prioritize. To create a space that values Magic and freedom, precise acts of generosity and emotional criticality should be our intention.

I wonder: What would happen if a whole theater profession was based on TOGG? With calls to diversify theater and performance, #theateriswhite, #oscarswhite, the baby boomer base of most institutional theaters dwindling (Stern 2011), and the high cost of tertiary education, how would TOGG effect the influence of pedagogy and the profession? I wonder how do we get to the square root of what matters: impact the culture, as defined by cultural theorist Jeff Chang (2014, 4):

Culture is the realm of images, ideas, sounds, and stories. It is our shared space. Is the narrative we are immersed in every day. It is where people find community, and express their deepest held values[...]

My main fascination that drives this essay, dear reader, could how we teach acting or performing be the spark to effect cultural change in theater and beyond?

From the Foot to the Whole Body

In 2020, I received the assignment to teach Acting I in my university program. I never dreamt of teaching Introduction to Acting; it felt like the place theater departments acculturate students into the "Biz-ness." Upon reflection,

my university theater training felt like the destruction of the butterfly in Pablo Neruda's (2015) poem, "To the Foot from Its Child." Neruda explores how our innate childhood desires to be imaginative, playful, and liberated often become falsely ensconced within the restrictive realities of daily adulting. He sets up the premise that the child's foot, a representation of the whole body, dreams of playful possibility beyond its physical limitation. It imagines the world as a butterfly or an apple, but then is confined to the hard, pre-shaped, utilitarian shoe through which society teaches the foot to interpret reality. This "Cruel Reality Shoe" pedagogy dehumanizes the foot and ultimately destroys its hope to fly or be something delicious and original.

From my experience, I felt like we were being sized for our shoes—where we became "serious" about the Profession, acculturated to the restrictive realities and expectations of "the Biz." In my first college acting class, we deep dived into Shurtleff's (1978) *Audition*, monologues, trust and other theater games, and were constantly told how to fit into Hollywood, Broadway. The Path. The Churn. The Method. Furtive or innocent, each professor sewed my shoe sole and positioned my eyelets.

It did not matter; I loved it! My teenage excitement was in direct opposition of Neruda's view of the shoe life—at the time, I did not feel constricted, I felt free! I was away from my parents—theater felt like the ultimate symbol of freedom, my rebellion, because it was opposite of their immigrant reality. I loved my shoe, and I wanted to be Nike, Adidas, or whatever got me the part, or took me to my teachers' Hollywood-Broadway utopia.

Then something happened; I joined a show created by UCLA Public Health where we researched AIDS, STDs, love, and sex for a show about issues that mattered to students. I saw how performance could be a bridge for community dialogue. I then encountered performance artists in Los Angeles who audaciously told stories; Lecoq-trained Chicago performance artists who spoke about a blue-collar vision of performance, embedded practice, and emotion; and Chicanx theater artists in San Antonio who were not tied to an industry and constantly made magic. This shoe got a hole in the toe because these artists and experiences opened me up to the idea I had a choice, vision, and that performing, broadly experienced, was where I could embody freedom. These folks offered frameworks for imagining how I could teach performance to future generations. I had the tools within me and the stories to tell, to value my butterfly, my family, and the communities I traversed.

Acting 1 as Social Engagement

Tasked to teach Acting 1, I set out to create a PlayFullSpace that allowed for a fluid nonbinary journey and did not force students to be stuck in cruel shoes.² I spoke to practitioners, I mined my own experience, and I scoured books on acting training like Bartow's (2006) *Training of the American Actor*.

Emblematic of the other texts I read, Bartow (2006, xviii) reminds us that modern acting training began because Broadway producers needed a way “to create a company of actors, [they] needed a process for obtaining uniform results, a way of creating a common artistic language.” This created an attitude that confines actors into prescribed roles within a capitalistic construct. Over time, this training model became the root of what is considered proper technique. Going through Bartow’s book, theater still shines only on its saints—in the name of the Stanislavski, the Adler, Hagen, Strasburg, the Viewpoints. Amen. As with visual art, there is a deification of the solo Artist, the great Teacher, the European Philosopher/Philosophy/Artist to which we owe our lineage: “These techniques, with the possible exception of Viewpoints training, were regionally appropriated from European sources and subjected to a process of Americanization” (2006, xi). This is old news. Theater is still entrenched in American exceptionalism through borrowing Europe’s way of reducing a history of global perspectives into a myopic singular gaze: “Singly and together these techniques have become the ways American actors are universally trained” (2006, xi). Bartow felt like leader of the old shoe school; I did not and do not want to become another collegial cordwainer.

I decided to make the acting class a social engagement performance project. In the spirit of the artist collective, My Barbarians’ Post-Living-Ante-Action Theater (n.d.), I would enact ideas from TOGG to use the techniques of acting—real and imagined by the artist—to engage students to think about embodied practice, discover critical emotional literacy, and consider how they build a cohort community. I have always felt any subject matter I teach is a vehicle to exchange wisdom about larger global issues. This is central to my artistic practice and I thought—why not an acting class as a platform to serve the same purpose?

Bruce Blocks Bartow’s Punch

Here is where Jeet Kune Do, a martial art methodology developed by Lee and passed on after his untimely death, assisted me in shaping the class. In the *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Lee (1975, 12) lives perpendicular to Bartow’s notion of technique:

Jeet Kune Do favors formlessness so that it can assume all forms and since Jeet Kune Do has no style, it can fit within all styles. As a result, Jeet Kune Do utilizes always and is bound by none and, likewise, uses any techniques or means which serve its end.

Formlessness! Yes! Not being bound—Neruda and Lee speak my butterfly language. It is not that Lee advocates for throwing away technique, he warns: “Do not deny the classical approach simply as a reaction, for you will have

created another pattern and trapped yourself there” (Lee 1975, 25). That binary is a trap; as Lee (1975, 21) articulates, a student stuck in one school loses their self in relation to their other humans—be it the audience, or their collaborators:

Once conditioned in a partialized method, once isolated an enclosing pattern, the practitioner faces opponent through a screen of resistance—he is “performing” his stylized blocks and listening to his own screaming and not seeing what the opponent is really doing.

Lee’s precepts provide a foundation to design the PlayFullSpace, a double helix of construction and deconstruction that attempts to undo any shoeification of the student. Jeet Kune Do offers a philosophy for the kinetic motion of being an actor, the interconnectedness of the art with something beyond the stage, and how the actor needs to be in relation to the world inside and outside of themselves. In this way, technique and theater’s ideal of engaging humans to delve into the human experience can be honored. In performance training, we can teach someone to respect both, for as Lee (1975, 10) reminds us, “The aim of art is not the one-sided promotion of spirit, souls and senses, but the opening of all human capacity—thought, feeling, will—to the life rhythm of the world of nature.”

Lee’s Building Blocks to TOGG

Lee speaks about training that focuses on simply learning the punch, kick, block, and feint rather on which technique. This caused me to ask: what are the basic building blocks of a performer? I looked at other professors in my program; I took pieces of their classes so students would understand their vocabulary. I scribbled on my notepad: storytelling, performance/poetry, improv, Meisner, neutral mask, scene work, monologue, with my work on zero-mask, characters, clowning, rasquachisme, and collaborative theater. My goal was to create a space where rather than acculturating students, they could play against or with these ideas to better understand themselves as actors/performers.

This reminded me of the same process I used to create a Theater program for middle and high school students in Chicago, where the units were based on the themes of the students’ year. The curriculum was about learning skills of expression, empathy, generosity, collaborative work, performative analysis of text, character, and engagement that students could use no matter what discipline they get into, and if they wanted to, have the backbone to become good actors.³ For example, sixth grade focused on learning the rules of the school, so students performed an adapted version of Cornerstone Theater’s *Everyman in the Mall*. Ninth graders used Campbell’s Hero’s Journey to create

their own mythology plays. Tenth grade students developed performance installations where they embodied Day of the Dead altars, which connected to the larger curriculum that centered cultural customs. The techniques were bridges to the abstract ideas to explore with the students; they were not about replicating how I learned acting. Yes, they had to learn how to haiku, intention, character, worldbuilding, and rules of improvisation, but these were ways to explore their own emotional contexts and relationships to each other and their worlds. All skills scaffolded; it was about providing students experiences they could bond over, a feeling of community, and developing an empathetic culture through curriculum design.

How Do We Create a Genuine Generous Culture?

Chang's vision of culture keeps gnawing at me. What culture are we seeking to create in the classroom, the university, the profession? In a conversation we have over how to teach during the pandemic, Professor Harry Waters, Jr. (2020), long-time actor, professor of theater at Macalester College says:

(I come from) a performing arts background molded through the 1970's period in New York, now called the Black Arts Movement. We—I speak very broadly and proudly—were making theater, plays, readings, stagings in formal theater spaces as well as found sites. We were learning to be actors/artists/writers/directors by learning to be human beings with each other—saving, feeding, loving, laughing, shaming, celebrating all the while. Community Theater was not a conscious thinking; it was the way the world worked best. Everyone learned from each other and the elders.

How do we carry this spirit—one that honors fluidity, freedom, and honors all forms of expression as valid possibilities for telling universal stories—into the culture of performance? Into the university as a whole? Waters, Jr. offered a simple idea: start the class with what you are good at—games and play—and have them tell a story.

A Daydreammemory

Third week in Nigeria; I attempt to teach interactive performance to the group. I talk about engagement and a system of evaluation I created to offer a framework to investigate what engages us—SEED: Striking, Engaging, Entertaining, and Delicious. Each word a bridge to discuss sensorial meaning for the artist and receiver, a cheat sheet for the first step of Lerman's Critical Response (Lerman and Borstel 2022). I developed SEED to create a common vocabulary within a cross-cultural intergenerational community. I ask the group if we

can go outside and create a SEED public performance that engages audiences to participate with us. Someone comes up with the idea of engaging a food stand and to sing and celebrate the person working. A performance of GenuineGenerosity indeed.

We all agree and walk over to the food/drink street stand near the school. We arrive, singing, happy; no one at the stand knows what is going on. A soldier comes in with gun pointing at us. He is serious. The students explain that he thinks we are staging a revolt on the street. Things are tense. Soibifaa switches the mood, and says (not in English), “We are celebrating our friend’s birthday. We are so happy; please join us for a drink.” Everyone starts singing—I do not know what is going on, but I improvise. One student becomes the birthday person! We then celebrate the soldier, dance, sing, and Soibifaa buys him an alcoholic drink (I know, it is Ramadan!). The soldier leaves, and we zoom away, laughing a song to celebrate our escape!

The Five Aquatic Pillars of TOGG

The daydream reminds me there is still something missing. Am I creating a false utopia too? Comedian Steve Martin’s voice echoes: “Cruel TOGG Shoes!” I assemble all my notes, chew Waters, Jr.’s idea in my head, and sketch down five pillars (because I am half-Muslim) for TOGG as an exercise:

- 1 TOGG celebrates the performance of possibility.
- 2 TOGG is relational and calls for resilience and support from the ensemble to discover the genuine relationships to nourish each other.
- 3 TOGG is a quest for genuine kin, acknowledgment of kin, and a way for us to imagine this relation.
- 4 TOGG acknowledges that art making, especially performance, is a way of accessing critical feeling and centers Joy, Competition, Compassion, and Mindfulness.
- 5 TOGG honors the amateur and Bruce Lee’s “Using no way as a way; having no limitation as limitations” (1975, 27) as the path for performance/art making.

Scholars Jill Dolan, Peter Zazzali, and José Muñoz provide guiding lights for the pillars. The match is first lit in my head by Zazzali. Inspired by Dolan’s essay written after September 11th, Zazzali focuses on the New Zealand school of drama as a model for training actors centering Maori protocols and a “rigorous regard for the collective” (Zazzali 2020, 31). Zazzali sees this as hope during a dystopic time like the current pandemic: “Actor training engenders hope, especially in precarious times like the present” (25). This hope comes from Dolan’s definition of utopia as “a boundless ‘no-place’ where the social

scourges that currently plague us[...]might be ameliorated, cured, redressed, solved, never to haunt us again" (2010, 37). In Dolan's construction, I see hope framed as a "no-place" where someone can imagine educating others to embody the zero place—a place of possibility in relation to Lee's praxis "Using no way as a way; having no limitation as limitations" (Lee 1975, 27). Hope additionally exists in relation to Dolan's framing through finding compassion and connection to each other within the void "that stands right in the middle between this and that. The void is all-inclusive, having no opposite—there is nothing which it excludes or opposes. It is living void because all forms comes out of it and whoever realizes the void is filled with life and power in the love of all being beings" (Lee 1975, 7). This love and zero-place can be the location of dream-making and possibility. As Dolan (2010, 39) writes, "Theatre can move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change." This forms the basis of the first tenet of TOGG: Accept that performance can inspire to enact the future we want. Imagine a future through the performance through connecting through love and hope—honoring the zero (the symbol of possibility) inside you and others.

Muñoz (2009, 25) establishes the acknowledgement of fluidity as both "utopian and queer." This recognition is also an acknowledgment of our connection intergenerationally that holds us during times of joy and crisis that leads to our resilience. Muñoz writes, "Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support" (2009, 91). The act of performance gives people the tools to imagine their own futurity, kinship. Engaging in TOGG works to create a practice of this modality of resilience and support, the second pillar of TOGG. As someone who is Iranian-Guatemalan-Italian-Mayan, my life as a performer provided me tools to understand this through the act of embodied performance, engaging with others, and understanding the source of human emotion and intentionality.

I understand this is a stance. And to extend this idea of kinship and relation, Harjo (2019) inspires my framing of TOGG's third pillar by providing a "polyvalent" for me/us to refashion how I/we think about the performance of genuine relationship and its role in imagining our futures. Harjo frames indigenous futurity in relation to her own Mvskoke heritage, community knowledge. Harjo (2019, 28) creates and then remixes the term: "kin-space-time envelope," explaining how she renegotiates the term's use within "an Indigenous knowledge system. A shift toward Mvskoke practices of kinship and knowing the world yields an imaginary that connects with many forms of kin, sites, and temporalities." For Harjo, and in relation to TOGG, this act of

storytelling, performing, being in relation with elders, and other community members is not separate; it connects to our joy. As Harjo (2019, 28) writes:

a kin-space-time envelope that reminds me to be joyful in my interactions with kin. Kin-space-time envelopes provide advisement for how to be in the world. An Indigenous kin-space-time envelope considers ancestral practices that we draw upon to renovate, reinvigorate, and sustain our bodies, psyches, livelihoods, and communities.

With TOGG, the participants create kinship through performance, but this is not anthropological, a separation where the performer helicopters into a site and tells a story about it. This is about creating genuine relationships based on another tenet of the kin-time-space-envelope: “A kin-space-time envelope can be a memory, but not solely in the sense of recalling a scene or a vignette; it also provides instruction for how to be in the world, or it invokes a sense of responsibility in the person recalling the memory” (Harjo 2019, 28). The performer in creating and seeking the genuine, cannot forget their relation to those around them past, present, and future. Performance enacts the kin-space-time-envelope—be it a play, a story, a joke. In this way the collective artists can create a culture that acknowledges our kin, our possibility of being kin, and the agonistic nature and discomfort of performing together as an ensemble (because we are kin) as we seek to find a playful way to embody the world that we sensorial witness and wish to live in.

The idea of creating a culture based on Joy, Competition, Compassion, and Mindfulness comes from Golden State Warriors’ coach Steve Kerr (Freiberg n.d.). While writing this essay, the Warriors have won the championship for the fourth time. His players talk about a culture of family, generosity, and joy (Ballard n.d.). Kerr’s four tenets: Joy, Competition, Compassion, and Mindfulness serve as a basis for TOGG’s fourth pillar. Instead of Competition, I use the word Play. I ask my students: Are they playing to play, playing to win, or playing to survive while engaged in a scene, monologue, or performance gesture? The idea is to see their actions with others in relation to themselves. At times, they only engage in one; other times it changes. It does not have to be about always playing to win, it can be a way to strive for the same thing and be in relation with one another. Playing to play, we tap into playfulness, create a quality of fun. This acknowledgement of the alternation of play honors the players. Play and Kerr’s other three tenets create a PlayFullSpace for people to always want to come to work, engage at their fullest, and want the best for everyone within the ensemble.

For these pillars to be realized, a culture that honors the amateur, a person who does an action out of love of it, in all of us is required—the fifth pillar. The amateur can be a better performer than the professional because they do it out of joy and love. Prioritizing action out of our love, joy, foregrounds the

intentionality of participants' nourishment. The amateur's hunger can be satiated by declaring the path to artistic or personal development can be many. Here, Lee's (1975, 27) "no way as a way" serves as a beacon to light the amateur's way and gives the participant a mantra of possibility to find genuine relationships, seek kin, and center Kerr's four tenets.

Madness/Dreaming

I feel like some storefront preacher who weaves all kinds of principles and philosophies into a huge tapestry of theories that border upon madness. I fear my own voice skipping like a record. It lulls to me sleep; I dream:

Giant patented leather office shoes fly in like Spidermen on Broadway from the top of the theater. They battle large multicolor butterflies. I scream to stop the fight. I scream dream nonsense: "Acting is fake. Performing is genuine. I want to be a president performing, not an acting president." People living, and those who passed, walk into my dreamscreenview. Cheech and Chong start teaching a crowd how to improvise. Their techniques from their days in Vancouver. Rhodessa Jones joins them, and Divine, from John Waters' movies, takes over. "Let me show you how it's done," reliving a monologue from Hair Spray. A screen plays: Marina Abramovic and James Franco converse about acting and performance.

Marina: "What if rehearsal was an experiment? What if you didn't rehearse. Everything was a re-performance! Is it not theater?" (The Museum of Modern Art 2010). She laughs!

Director Ellen Sebastian Chang pops up as an emoji, her words, from a previous text she sent me, flash like ticker tape in front of us all: "Hmmm is the Theater of Generosity a counterpoint to Artaud Theater of Cruelty or a continuum of Boal Theater of the Oppressed? Is there acting without personal desire? What is generosity? Is there subtext in acts of generosity?" (Sebastian Chang 2022).

My emoji responds: "It's an extension of Jeet Kune Do. Boal is mixed in because of Freire. And games ... but it's more about style of no style ... to tap into the spirit of the amateur. Generosity was the label the person placed on what I was doing ... I am thinking more about how to create a class where theater is the exploration of the genuine (be it emotion, desire, relation, or magic), and that includes generosity and joy ... as more of a counterpoint of Theater of the Authentic."

Ellen Sebastian Chang's emoji responds: "In simple language a return to the creativity most humans are inherently born with. Buddha nature. What Kirstin Linklater focused on in freeing the natural voice. Or Viola Spolin's brilliant section in Theater Games for the Lone Actor her section on The Five Obstacles ..."

Viola Spolin on a bicycle recites the Five Obstacles: “Five obstacles to direct experience: One, the approval/disapproval syndrome; Two, self-pity; Three, success/failure; Four, attitude; Five, fear” (Spolin, Sills, and Sills 2001).

My dearly departed friends scholar Dr. Beverly J. Robinson and performance artist Laurie Carlos laugh at me. Laurie shouts over their laughter: “You always complicate things, Karimi! It’s so simple. Just make the cake.”

Another spirit: performance artist James Luna with a suitcase in his hand from a performance I assisted him with in Iowa, just nods, “I involve the audience. People give you control of their imagination. I can have them outraged one moment and crying the next. That’s the power the audience gives you. It’s knowing that and knowing how to use it effectively. I guess the statement is that I’m not up here to entertain, though I can be damn entertaining. I’m here to teach you” (Fernandez-Sacco 2019).

TOGG in Action

The class now designed; I take Waters, Jr.’s idea and start class with playing games and a story: students must tell an emotional memory story from their early childhood. I give them three tools to read them: breathe, value your words, and take your time. We warm up in a silly/serious way (instead of cat/cow yoga—I call it meow/moo), play games in between to get them to play together as a community, and use a Karimi remixed version of Lerman’s Critical Response so they can share what engaged them and how they were affected by the way people told stories.

Fast forward: I give them their “final.” Their challenge: to satirize what they learned at the end the class. They are to use a collaborative performance method in which we catalogue everything that’s been learned over the semester as a group, and then in their individual ensembles, they create the performance. It’s always interesting what they choose to make fun of. They always make fun of me, of course. I have been portrayed from an absent-minded, nutty professor to the angry alpha Cobra Kai drill sergeant, yet that is not the most engaging. The most SEED thing they do is what they choose from the subject matter. They always make fun of the zero mask because it is the most difficult thing for them, and it is preposterous and silly at the beginning, and they always find a way to put that in there. The warm-ups, which they love and hate, also make their way into the mix. One group made fun of SEED and absurdified it, calling Sensational Evil Elongated Dinosaurs and created a SEED scene based on all of them becoming these dinosaurs. I threatened to make a t-shirt afterwards, and we all laughed. This was what resonated to me—their laughter, their joy. I did not even need to read my evaluations; they honored the experience by showing how fun it was, and their generous spirits felt genuine that day.

Seema Sueko Responds//I Dream//Again

I ask Director/Consensus Organizer Seema Sueko for help to think about how to create a culture of genuine generosity. She sends me links and says, instead of Intro to Acting class, she would rather create a “Daily Arts Exercise” to begin students’ journey. Sueko (2022) explains:

Recognizing that students are balancing a number of challenges and opportunities in college and that the research demonstrates that everyday creativity is a pathway to flourishing, I think a course which encourages a daily creative or arts practice would benefit students academically, emotionally, mental health-wise, as well as build interest in the arts. The class could include daily arts prompts that engage the students in 20-60 minutes of creativity. The prompts can range from playwriting, to acting, to choreography, to directing, to design, to voice and dialect work, to composing, to any element of the arts. Just as we have normalized daily physical exercise, my wish for the students who take the Daily Arts Exercise class is that they cultivate a daily creativity practice that they carry with them throughout their lifetime.

Yes! A creativity practice! I make two perpendicular L’s with my fingers to frame my students currently performing. I squint my eyes to imagine Sueko’s vision blending with all my other ideas swirl into a pedagogical sundae, a conceptual mosh pit.

The Acting 1 class becomes an incubator for innovation; people start thinking about the various ways they can create projects—interdisciplinary art making where performances take place in galleries, buses, proscenium theaters, and even grocery stores. Students take over the design of a new season for the university where they bring these projects to life to the larger university community and also remix the classics by adding their own physical and personal responses—everything from poems to small videos that they film in the communities that they live in or intersect with a daily basis. A group of students go to a theater conference and ask “If we honor one of Lee’s central tenets of Jeet Kune Do, ‘Moving, be like water. Still, be like a mirror. Respond like an echo’, would companies be so rigid? Would they use the word rigor all the time?” Water is not rigorous. Fluid, malleable. A theater company more open to more voices?

Somewhere. Maybe Nigeria. Someone will do a radio show, advise a businessperson how to dream up a new idea using kinesthetic perception, and everyone that has these classes will be connected in a large global network. Their connection: the kinship of valuing each other’s stories, each other’s whole self, each other’s amateur love of building worlds to engage audiences. Harjo’s philosophies change how students see their four years, and they take classes outside of the arts to relate their ancestral path—to honor their ancestors

while they build futures based on learning about the stories of their past, the indigenous roots of our global histories and intersections, and build to make the world more just and balanced—like water.

Maybe the zero will become the new symbol of performance/art departments. A mascot!

Universities will make theater mandatory because Theater of Genuine Generosity changes how they see theater's role in academia. Universities will notice the students who take theater are emotionally healthier, have fun, learn to love their body, and have a stronger connection to family and ancestral stories.

Theater students are asked to lead across campus this discussion of emotional literacy and the Theater of Genuine Generosity becomes a household name, a meme because so many students have made fun of it. A culture of kinship at the university is fostered and fun is centered so much that retention levels at universities that have this type of theater program go to almost 100%, students have better work/life balance, and rates of depression and self-inflicted injuries go down. A new type of way of working professionally emanates through the entire profession, and a new generation wants experiences—the students are ready to respond to them and create projects that are more engaging, making the process of creating performance fun. The act of making performance is just enjoyable—the joy of the amateur infects the profession. Whole communities want to get involved. This energy sparks new ways of civic engagement—where people dance, sing, make art socially, and thus, build projects, talk about civic issues, and the premises of “be like water” and kinship become how people build cities and make political and institutional change, where everyone builds a resilience because they can face things, has a rootedness to the stories of their ancestry, and builds plans for the future to build strong kinship's globally.

I wake up, and all my students look at me as if I am crazy, and again, we just all laugh because we realize that one of their satires has come true.

Conclusion

I have re-read the essay; I have used quotes as an Authority to make it appear that there is a Truth. Espousing Lee, Chang, Zazzali, Muñoz like some biblical or qur'anic believer. I quote Spolin, I reference Lerman and Boal, and I throw in some hooks.

I realize I am hypocrite. Or maybe the agonism inside of me is the reality of the culture I want to bring into the classroom, into the field and industry of performance. A rooted uncomfortability that edges us into dialogue, wisdom exchange, joy, nourishment, arguments, songs, new innovations.

This was never about theater or performance. It is about the Tao of Genuine Generosity. A style of no style to create a culture of playfulness, kinship, empathy, compassion as well as risk-taking to seek how to live in a world of possibility.

TOGG is not a methodology, perhaps more a feign, a jab, like Lee teaches, to keep folks honest. A way to re-frame how we evaluate to ensure we create non-authoritarian climates and PlayFullSpaces of potentials for butterflies to soar. Maybe it is the best way I know how to simulate a genuine relationship between a reader and an author. Tell my story, and let it lie there. Perhaps, that's the only truth. No constrictive shoe or butterfly utopias, just one idea to spark change. Build your/our world together. It's time to act, no matter what type of performance we create or experience we design. Let's fly!

"If people say Jeet Kune Do is different from 'this' or from 'that,' then let the name of Jeet Kune Do be wiped out, for that is what it is, just a name. Please don't fuss over it" (Lee 1975, 208).

Notes

- 1 For a more extensive look at Dokubo's work, check out the article "Soibifaa Dokubo ... Life of a stage and screen merchant" (Agency Report 2021).
- 2 A reference to performer Steve Martin, of course: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8fuBiOwNmk>.
- 3 One sixth grader did become an actor: the Lakers' Anthony Davis performed in *Space Jam 2*.

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