

**Reflections on a Peace Education Theatre Project:  
Performing Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *Peace Mum*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This essay offers reflective practitioner insights into an applied theatre peace education project performed in and around Victoria BC in 2007 and 2008. The essay consists of three reflections: The first offers a narrative overview of the project and production, including the post-show conversations with student audiences that were carried out in-role; the second is in poetic form that invites deeper levels of understanding and response to a lived performance event; the third and final reflection surveys *performative writing* as an effective and affective means to write about performed research or other kinds of performances such as applied theatre.

**Reflection 1: Narrative**

In the autumn of 2007 and spring of 2008 I performed an adapted version of Dario Fo and Franca Rame's (2005) one-woman play—originally titled *Mother Courage: Cindy Sheehan's real and imaginary diary* and re-titled for British and Canadian audiences as *Peace Mum*—about American mother and peace activist Cindy Sheehan. This production was presented by Puente Theatre in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and was directed and co-adapted (with me) by artistic director Lina de Guevara. Puente Theatre is a company with a long history of commitment to immigrant women, theatre of the oppressed, international theatre and multicultural storytelling ([www.puentetheatre.ca](http://www.puentetheatre.ca)). When de Guevara, a former Chilean refugee and founder of Puente, invited me to perform the play, I happily agreed, with one condition: We would take the production into schools rather than perform it to a regular public audience. My feeling was that it was young people who would most likely be unfamiliar with Sheehan's story who needed to hear it most, and de Guevara concurred.

De Guevara and I set out to adapt the play by trimming it down to forty minutes and focusing on the heart of Sheehan's story—the loss of her son Casey in the Iraq war and her subsequent six-week vigil camping outside of George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. Sheehan wanted to meet with President George W. Bush who had sent her son into a war, and to his death, for reasons she did not understand. Although Sheehan failed to get an audience with Bush, she succeeded in spearheading a peace movement in the US that continued the difficult work to extricate American troops from an unjust and illegal war. In the play—pieced together by Fo and Rame from Sheehan's blog,

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interviews, speeches and letters to the President—Sheehan speaks directly to the audience as she tells her story. Story theatre involves a blend of narrative and action as an active form of storytelling (Sills, 1971). We took a story theatre approach to the production and made use of very simple props: a table and chair, a folding camp chair, a sheet thrown over the table to turn it into a tent, a three-ring binder that became a laptop computer. Effective use of light and sound brought the production to a more polished technical level.

The play was performed for the University of Victoria's Applied Theatre students (including my own first year class) and also in a number of Victoria area high schools. One of those high schools was Pearson College, an international pre-university program funded by the Canadian federal government. Pearson provides scholarships to students from 100 countries, and the evening I performed *Peace Mum* to this diverse audience—including students from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine and many other war torn countries—was a remarkable experience.

Due to my interest in theatre audience education, I was committed to carrying out talkbacks after every performance (Prendergast, 2002, 2008a, 2008b). De Guevara's long-time experience as a Joker in Forum Theatre made her an ideal facilitator and she began each post-show conversation for a few minutes while I recovered backstage from the emotional journey of the play and then came out to join her and the audience. At some point during our touring of the play, I wondered out loud to de Guevara about how it might work if I invited the audience to speak to me in-role as Sheehan. This idea stemmed from my own research and work as an audience educator, because I had long-felt that the theatre- and drama-in-education technique of debriefing with students in-role could be very effectively applied to other types of theatre productions. I was willing to try this idea out, as was de Guevara.

This experiment had a number of positive results. Students responded with deep levels of commitment, and I was challenged to honor their questions and comments in a way that I could only hope reflected how I imagined Sheehan might do so herself. De Guevara also invited students to take on roles themselves and I found myself questioned by reporters, soldiers, other bereft mothers, and characters from both ends of the political spectrum. Occasionally, I would be addressed as myself (the actor), so I responded by rising from the camp chair that was so symbolic of Sheehan's vigil, indicating in this way that I was out of role. If the next question was for Sheehan (the character), I sat back down and took on her perspective again. This clarified for the audience who was responding to their question or comment, the actor or the character. Every audience appeared comfortable with this doubled role-play and it was Sheehan with whom the vast majority of dialogue was engaged.

The evening we took the show to Pearson College, the post-show conversation was about an hour in length—much longer than the show itself—and clearly could have continued for much longer if not for time constraints. In my view, this international audience had a deeper understanding of, and therefore a deeper investment in, the issues presented by the play. War was not just a distant concept for many of them; it was a present or recent

reality in their home countries. It was an exhausting process for me to remain in-role for this length of time, but the richness of these students' responses, the sensitivity with which they addressed Sheehan and the tough questions they were unafraid to pose both to themselves and to the character, were nothing short of phenomenal. Some posed as journalists querying Sheehan's intentions, some as war victims expressing empathy and solidarity, some as themselves asking what they could do to help. The researcher part of me was yelling in the background about what a missed opportunity it was to not be recording this encounter. But the actor-teacher in me was thoroughly caught up in the moment-by-moment community conversation that was being held about the cost of war and the struggle for peace.

## **Reflection 2: Poetic**

A couple of months after closing the show, I was at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Urbana, Illinois to present the findings of my postdoctoral research project on poetic inquiry as an arts-based research methodology (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009). I attended a pre-conference workshop on performative writing conducted by Ronald Pelias (1999, 2004, 2005), noted performance theorist. Pelias has used poetry as a technique in his writing, so I knew his workshop would be very open to my experimentation with poetry as a form of performative writing. During the workshop we were given thirty minutes to write something that incorporated some of his key criteria for performative writing:

1. Performative writing expands the notions of what constitutes disciplinary knowledge.
2. Performative writing features lived experience, telling, iconic moments that call forth the complexities of human life.
3. Performative writing rests on the belief that the world is not given but constructed, composed of multiple realities.
4. Performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses.
5. Performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal.
6. Performative writing participates in relational and scholarly contexts.

(Pelias, 2005, pp. 417-420)

What came out of my mind and pen in that half hour is the poem below, *after the show*, which is almost unchanged from the first draft. I had been holding the experience of what had happened in my talkbacks of *Peace Mum* in a very reflective way since the production. My goal was to try to write about in-role talkbacks in a scholarly peer-reviewed article. But the closeness, the intimacy, I felt in regard to this particular experience was making it extremely difficult for me to gain the cooler position and the more objective distancing needed to turn a lived experience into just another academic 'product'.

I kept returning to this poem, below, over time and finding myself resistant to 'cushioning' it somehow with context, theory, citation, quotation, analysis and discussion.

I did write a second poem that seemed to resonate well with *after the show* and to provide perhaps some context for the reality of war in America. At the time, I was appointed at an American university, albeit a very progressive one in probably the most liberal part of the country, Massachusetts. But my teaching responsibilities took me to Georgia a number of times, and I was struck by the high number of young men and women in uniform I saw in airports in that part of the country. The poem *soldiers* is my attempt to situate myself as a Canadian, a peace-monger and a mother in relation to my performance of *Peace Mum*.

I offer these two poems as reflections of this experience in my own practice that tries to do two things: to accurately present my post-show in-role conversations about this play with young people; and to illustrate the potential that narrative, performative and poetic approaches can have to communicate highly emotionally-charged moments in our professional and personal lives.

**soldiers**

they sit afore me  
in the plane  
Atlanta-to-  
Seattle-bound

these crew-cut  
handsome boys  
in camouflage  
& desert boots

remind me  
of war  
of four  
or more  
thousands  
just like them

dead upon arrival

a stewardess  
gives a public  
thank-you

invokes patriot  
businessmen  
to applaud

me  
i wish to see  
otherwise

in caps and sweats  
emblazoned with  
crests of glory  
on a ballfield

then & there  
i could cheer  
them on

here  
on this flight  
i hover over  
yet behind  
these not-yet  
men

spread around them  
in my sorrow  
the weak  
yet wild-feathered  
wings of protection

a mother's love

**after the show**

after the show  
i speak  
with my audience  
as Cindy Sheehan

i sit  
in the camping chair  
that was  
unfolded first  
in Crawford, Texas  
for a long vigil

the struggle  
to find meaning  
make sense  
    of the meaninglessness  
    of the senselessness

in the death  
of her son Casey  
in Iraq

i sit  
in the camping chair  
in dialogue  
with my audience  
of young people  
who are meeting  
Cindy & her story  
as an ordinary  
someone  
like their own mums  
for the first time

they too  
want to make sense  
to know why

i answer  
every question  
as i wish  
(or hope  
or pray)  
she might

i think quickly  
in that blinding  
double-mindedness  
of an actor  
inside the me/  
not-me

and also  
as a teacher  
a mother of sons  
who desires  
peace above all

so each question  
becomes an opening  
for reflection  
for understanding  
for learning

i sit  
in the camping chair  
under the Texas sun  
in a high school  
auditorium

desiring an end to war  
& the empty deaths  
of thousands  
upon thousands

under the desert sun  
thousands of miles  
away

i may  
(may i?)  
sit here  
forever

talking with  
these students

dreaming  
together  
of peace

### **Reflection 3: Performative Writing**

In the final section of this article, I attempt to theoretically weave together the narrative, poetic and performative writing approaches taken herein in order to provide a workable space for theatre researchers/practitioners who wish to creatively and critically reflect on their work. The use of performative writing strategies, such as narrative and poetry, by those of us who live, teach and research in theatre offers a welcome resonance of method and topic (Park-Fuller, 2003; Pollock, 1998). As Della Pollock (1998) writes:

Performative writing enters into ... the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, who has a stake in the outcome of the exchange. The writing/subject puts his/her own status on the line ... in the name of mobilizing *praxis*” (p. 96).

This kind of reflective praxis allows for productive and creative possibilities in writing performatively about performance matters.

Park-Fuller (2003) argues that performative writing “is a form that mirrors stage

interactions” (p. 305):

Performative writing ... makes apparent the broad ranged levels of agency experienced by a reporting researcher and by the reader of the report, as alternating performing and performed identities, confirming and arguing ideologies, subjective and objective discursive positions become created and then fade and are replaced in the acts of writing and reading. (p. 305)

In the reflective narrative and performative poetry offered above, I attempt to generate within my reader a sense of the lived experience of performing *Peace Mum* and engaging with audiences through in-role post-show conversations (Prendergast, 2010). Park-Fuller suggests to me in her theorizing that my writing is an effort to mirror the stage interaction that cannot be reproduced on the page as anything other than a pale imitation of the lived experience. To accept these intrinsic limitations in the translation from stage to page is to acknowledge the inherent differences between *performance* and *performative writing*. Performance is transitory and ephemeral, a slippery subject, that may only be partially and fragmentally reproduced in writing. Park-Fuller says that to pretend otherwise is to lose agency as both writer and reader.

Norman Denzin (2001) says “performance writing” (p. 36), is where “[t]he performer’s performance creates a space the other enters” (p. 36). The other in a theatre context is a spectator, and in a writing context is a reader. The similarities and differences between spectator and reader become significant when engaging in performative/ performance writing:

Performance writing is poetic and dramatic. It transforms literal (and transcribed) speech into speech that is first-person, active, in motion, processual. In such texts, performance and performativity are intertwined, each defines the other. (p. 36)

This present essay follows Denzin’s guidelines in the performance of a first-person narrative and reflective poems that intend to portray only the partial, necessarily biased, insider perspectives of a theatre project on peace education. While the intentional lack of the more traditional elements of a qualitative research report may frustrate some readers, it is my hope that other readers may sense the opening of a critical performative space for drama/theatre research within which “performance and performativity are intertwined” (p. 36). As Denzin describes it:

Using the methods of narrative collage, performance writing shows, rather than tells. It is writing that speaks performatively, enacting what it describes. It is writing that does what it says it is doing, by doing it. (p. 36)

As a drama/theatre educator who has spent many years instructing students to show rather than tell, it feels aesthetically ‘right’ to follow the same theatre-based advice in my writing practice, to begin to perform my writing (see Prendergast, 2007, 2009).

Fortunately for me, theorists and practitioners in qualitative inquiry and performance



studies have created various spaces for this kind of work, naming them “performance ethnography” (Denzin, 2003), “critical performative pedagogy” (Pineau, 2002, 2005) or “performing pedagogy” (Garoian, 1999). Prominent performance theorist Peggy Phelan has also turned her attention to the ways we speak about performance matters in writing (1998), positing that “[p]erformative writing seeks to extend the oxymoronic possibilities of animating the unlive that lies at the heart of performance as a making” (p. 13). Hers is a most poetic of definitions that invites a poetic representation in haiku form (see Prendergast, 2004a; Prendergast et al., 2009):

heart of performance:  
animating the unlive  
(oxymoronic)

This interpretation highlights the difficulty that makes itself present when writing about performance, a difficulty encountered by theatre, dance, or music critics, as well as by those writing in more academic contexts. Phelan argues that “[performative writing] is an inquiry into the limits and possibilities of the intersections between speech and writing ... [it] evokes what it names; it maps a territory not yet seen” (p. 13). The intersections between speech and writing are of central concern to those, like me, who live and research in theatre. Making use of arts-based research approaches has always felt to me like an appropriate fit between topic and method, as ways of putting my topic into action, into performance. Arts-based topics lend themselves to arts-based methods, and I am particularly interested in how poetry can help me both interpret and present lived experiences of performance (Prendergast, 2013).

I have performed these poems at national and international conferences and for graduate students in an arts-based research course on these topics (performance and poetic approaches to qualitative inquiry). I am a trained actor and have a fairly high comfort level on stage. But performing this kind of material has been an interesting challenge in that the more intimate and revelatory qualities of poetry make their own demands on a performer. The protection of the role that is usually present when acting a part is absent when sharing autoethnographic poetic inquiry. I have come to learn this through experience as I have felt flutters of performance anxiety before and during readings of my poems in classroom and conference settings. I see part of this nervousness as revealing of the tension of presenting myself as a scholarly ‘expert’ while at the same time sharing material that is subjective and affective in nature. The flip side, however, is that audience response to the risk-taking and vulnerability required to perform personal material in a scholarly setting is almost always very positive. I often have very meaningful discussions with both groups and individuals following such performances that I doubt would occur with a more standardized qualitative reporting method. I agree with poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s (1975/2007) assertion that “Poetry [is] the shortest distance between two humans” (p. 40).

To illustrate how this works for me through the processes of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009), I offer a second found poem (in addition to the Phelan haiku above) drawn from Della Pollock’s (1998) influential essay “Performing writing”:

*Performing Writing: A Found Poem*

Performative writing  
is what it is

not in itself

but for . . . for what?

Turning the page,  
turning the corner,

I have to say,

to the extent  
that it is,

it is for relatives,  
not identities;

it is for space and time;  
it is for a truly good laugh,  
for the boundary,

banal pleasures  
that twine bodies in action;

it is for writing,  
for writing our-selves  
out of our-selves,  
or writing our-selves

into what (never) was  
and may (never) be.

It is/is it for love?

(Pollock, 1998, p. 98)

To write in these poetic and narrative ways about performance is to practice performative writing. It is to remind myself, as Pelias (2005) reminds us, that “[w]ith lived experience, there is no separation between mind and body, objective and subjective, cognitive and affective. Human experience does not reduce to numbers, to arguments, to abstractions” (p. 418).

To conclude, I turn again to Della Pollock’s 1998 essay on performative writing and leave my reader/spectator with her recommendations that performative writing acts:

- To identify the need to make writing speak *as* writing
- To discern possible intersections of speech and writing
- To resolve the alienation of meaning and reference...by making

writing...perform a social function (p. 76)

Pollock posits performative writing as a response to a question that takes me back where this writing began, in the performance of Dario Fo and Franca Rame's play *Peace Mum* as a critical peace education project. Her question is: "How might *performative* writing not only speak the surrounding darkness but hail loss and lost pleasure in the place of rank commodification?" (p. 74). In performing the role of peace activist and mother Cindy Sheehan I experienced the power that one person's actions can have to make a difference in a world that is rank with commodification and its attendant social disconnection and alienation.

I leave the final word here to Cindy Sheehan, as written by Fo and Rame, which were the last words spoken in the Puente Theatre adaptation of *Peace Mum* I performed:

CINDY: [*Sitting in her camping chair*] My dear sweet boy died in Iraq on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 2004. He was killed by an Iraqi resistance fighter but George Bush and his gang could have easily have pulled the trigger themselves.

Over and over again it has been proved that they lied to us about the need to invade Iraq, and they continue to lie to us about the occupation.

If it wasn't for them my son would still be with me, and tens of thousands of other innocent people, including nearly five thousand American soldiers, would still be alive.

Isn't murder a crime? When will those people be called upon to face justice for their war crimes, their crimes against humanity?

Who wants to live in a world where murderers are allowed to move around freely, raining death and destruction down on innocent people?

I know I don't.

I'll let you know how I get on. [*She opens up her laptop and begins to write*]

*Lights fade out.*

(Fo & Rame, 2005, p. 13, adapted by Lina de Guevara and Monica Prendergast)

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