

## **Performing identity through research-based theatre: Brothers**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last few decades, performed research has emerged as a dynamic methodological approach where artist/scholars experiment with using performance to inquire and mobilize new knowledge. This article includes the autobiographical monologue *Brothers* as well as a critical reflection on the development and performance of the piece. The creation of the monologue incorporated a reflexive drama-based process to generate, analyze, and disseminate pivotal moments in the lives of the two brothers. Photo-albums, letters, journals, newspaper clippings, along with social media, provided data and stimuli. A discussion about the collaborative approach to writing and rehearsing the piece is included, as well as how performing the monologue in a theatre space during an academic conference shed new light on this approach to educational research.

### **Introduction**

Engaging in research-based theatre as a methodological approach has gained momentum over the last few decades with researchers in a variety of fields employing theatre to generate and disseminate research (Belliveau & Lea, 2011; Norris, 2010; Saldana, 2011; Sinclair & Belliveau, 2014). More specifically, the development of theatrical monologues as a form of research-based theatre has generated recent interest from artist-scholars (Carter, 2014). This article (along with the accompanying ones in this special issue) aims to build scholarly and practical insights on developing and performing monologues as a form of research. The dramatic monologue “Brothers” that is shared below was developed for a keynote presentation at the Artistry, Performance and Scholarly Inquiry Symposium in Melbourne, Australia in July 2014. The intent of creating the monologue was to explore my artistic identity using an autobiographical and theatre-based inquiry approach. I hoped through the process to explore my cultural heritage, examining how family and community shaped my artist, teacher, and scholar identities. To develop the monologue I engaged in a reflexive drama-based process to generate, analyze, and disseminate my understandings (Belliveau, 2006; Carter, 2014; Norris, 2010). Specifically, I used photo-albums, letters, journals, newspaper clippings, along with social media (i.e., Facebook) to provide data and stimuli in my journey to revisit the past to better understand my present.

I worked on “Brothers” for a period of three months in the spring of 2014, with the first month devoted to exploring, the second to scripting and devising, and the third rehearsing. From the outset, I wrote the monologue for it to be performed, and my intended audience included mainly those interested in performed research, art-making, teaching, and education. A collaborative approach was used with three colleagues assisting in creating, writing, and directing the work (Lea, 2012). During the same time my colleague Rita Irwin developed an autobiographical monologue about her artistic identity using a similar process. While rehearsing, Rita and I wove our monologues together to create “Precious Moments,” which we co-performed in Melbourne. Graham Lea participated in the development, writing, and rehearsal phase, guiding the work artistically. Janice Valdez also assisted in the development and staging of the monologues. Their work was instrumental in shaping both the written and performative elements of this work.

The exploratory techniques we engaged in during the development phase included sharing photos, drawing images, writing in role, tableaux, playback theatre, improvisation, and forum theatre (Dennis, 2004; Fels & Belliveau, 2008; Norris, 2010). Our development sessions focused primarily on artist and autobiographical identity and lasted anywhere between 90 to 150 minutes. Graham, Janice, or myself led the six interactive sessions. Notes and artifacts were collected during the development phase and these became valuable insights in drafting my monologue. The writing that emerged from the development phase was re-visited during rehearsals, and a number of lines from the initial text were eventually cut, and/or replaced by physical movements and/or gestures. An example of a line cut that became a blocking note during rehearsals is the crossing over the bridge (5<sup>th</sup> stanza below). Rather than having the line “We held our breath” I ended up showing the action by doing, rather than speaking. This represents an example where the narrative writing shifted towards theatre performance (MacKenzie & Belliveau, 2011).

The artistic exchanges within our collaborative group influenced the writing as well as the physical and visual depictions of the performed monologue. For instance, Rita brought in scarves to help share her story, mostly in response to the directors asking her to differentiate the various characters within her monologue. While rehearsing I borrowed a few of her scarves to explore what I might do with them. The scarves eventually became important props to bridge our monologues, as we exchanged them within our pieces. They also visually informed my story, as I transformed the scarves into various metaphoric representations, such as a river, a hockey stick, a climbing rope, to name a few. Physical movement and action within the monologue often included the use of scarves, and some are recorded within the stage directions below.

## **Monologue**

### **Brothers**

[Set consists primarily of two wooden blocks about 3 meters apart. George sits and stands on them.]

GEORGE (*enters and manipulates scarves on the floor*)  
gap, divide, crevasse  
overlap, bridge, in between

hockey, theatre, brother  
French, English, brother

Brother. Don  
Strong, smart, stubborn  
While all other 10 year olds played hockey and team sports  
Don took his snowshoes to the forest to check his traps  
Spent hours in the gym, disciplined, poised  
Sought new challenges, new horizons  
Ice climbing, rock climbing, mountain climbing  
He climbed in groups, as a guide, and often alone

His younger brother, George (that's me)  
Outgoing, chatty, social  
I loved hockey and all team sports  
If I wasn't playing hockey on the ice I'd play in our garage  
Sometimes with friends, often on my own  
Playing for hours  
Play by play broadcasting each move  
(*picks up a scarf and uses as a hockey stick*)  
"Belliveau, prend la rondelle. La passe a LeBlanc. C'est le  
but!"<sup>1</sup>  
I made my way to all the nooks and crannies of the garage  
In my element, playing

Don and I grew up in French  
A small Acadian village in eastern Canada called Memramcook  
An aboriginal name for crooked river  
When Don was 10 and I was 9, our friend Luc slipped in that  
winding river  
It was the first funeral I ever attended  
Each time Don and I crossed the bridge over the meandering river  
(*holds his breath as he steps over the river*)  
We never talked about why we did that, we just did

In our teens we started to listen to English radio and television  
Stumbled through English newspapers and magazines  
Met friends from the neighboring English town  
With our thick French accents, we set off to university

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<sup>1</sup> English translation: "Belliveau, takes the puck. Makes a pass to LeBlanc. He scores!"

In English

Don fell in love with robotics and me for the theatre

When not studying he climbed and I played hockey  
From hockey to theatre dressing room I traveled  
From lab to mountains he journeyed

I was wrestling with Shakespeare, butchering the language  
*(climbs onto block)*  
He was staring at the Himalayas, clenching for dear life  
Don summited Mt Tilicho, one of the great peaks in the world  
As Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, I left behind my French accent  
*(jumps off the block)*

MOM

*(folding laundry. She listens and then she chuckles to herself)*  
He doesn't know I can hear him mumbling the play by play through  
the wall! That George, my youngest, he always liked to talk, it's  
like he has his own stage and hockey rink in the garage! When he  
gets going you'd think he has a whole team out there ... he plays  
for hours!

His brother plays with him once in a while. But Don'd rather be  
out in the forest. You really couldn't have two different boys.  
One can't stop talking and the other hardly says a word. Still  
they're good friends. Take care of each other.

When they come home from University, they share the same room,  
even with two other bedrooms sitting empty. They talk and laugh  
until wee hours in the night. Bright and early, they head off  
together, Don to the gym and George for a run.

DON

It's hard to describe exactly what happened. I was climbing,  
taking in the view from the top of the world, up about 4000  
meters touching the clouds really, then all of a sudden I was at  
3000. *(beat)* I remember slipping, trying to hold on to my pack.  
*(looks up)* The moon is beautiful.

GEORGE

I was playing the Director in Pirandello's *Six Characters* - a  
demanding role. I was doing another play at the time and  
finishing my teaching degree. Fully sleep deprived. It happened  
in Act II. The six characters are trying to convince me that  
their story is worthy of the stage. They are there and they are  
not. I'm there and I'm not. I'm drifting into another world.

DON

How long have I been sliding. 30 seconds? 30 minutes? Just  
breathe in this stunning vista. Valleys, peaks.

GEORGE

I don't know my lines. They are gone. (*lost, so improvises the following lines*) "OK, I'd like you to move towards Madame Pace's dressing area. And you, you need to stop crying." I have no idea where I am. How long have I been lost? 5 seconds? 5 minutes?

DON

(*Waking up awkwardly. In awe*) Just look at the sun creep over the mountains, filling in the valleys. I've never seen a dawn like this. Am I awake, dreaming? (*DON touches his cheek, winces, struggling*) Ooohh, my shoulder. Where's my backpack?

GEORGE

"Mr. Director, can we show you the scene between the Father and daughter?" (*softly, an Actor*) Thank-you. (*as the Director character*) "Sir, this confession tale between you and your daughter is touching, but it won't play on stage. What we do here in the theatre is make believe."

DON

(*in distress*) Once in your life, George, you have to see the sunrise in the mountains. It's absolutely beautiful.

GEORGE

Don's passion and determination to test his limits, push the boundaries, live each day fully, never ceased. Carpe diem!

The second time he slid, [gap]<sup>2</sup> in the rugged Canadian Rockies, [divide] amongst the beauty of snow, rocks, and endless sky, [crevasse] he wasn't so lucky.

Now when I get lost, [bridge] when I start to slide, [overlap] he gives me a push ... or a kick in the butt, [in between] helps me see the beauty and find my way.

We're still connected.

### **Critical commentary**

The experience of developing, rehearsing, and performing the monologue provided a number of opportunities for in-depth critical reflection. I focus on a few moments from each of the three phases, where new understandings emerged about my artistic and family identity, as well as research-based theatre as a methodology.

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<sup>2</sup> The words in brackets echo opening words. They could be spoken by another voice for the opening and ending.

### **i. Development phase**

There were many avenues to begin the autobiographical exploration into my artistic identity. For instance, I have often wondered what it meant to lose my French accent while undertaking my university theatre-training program. Did this mean I lost part of my French Acadian identity? What was gained in becoming fluent in English? Which doors of possibilities opened? Which ones might have closed? What was I truly passionate about in my youth? Who were my mentors? What childhood memories linger? Which ones matter? Who am I? These questions, along with many others, were central to the development phase, and they led the drama-based process to particular places, and to further questions.

At the outset of this project, I had not intended nor thought of writing about my brother. However, through the role-playing, tableaux and creative writing he constantly appeared as a witness and pivotal influence in my life. In paying attention to, and remembering, his story, the monologue became about two brothers journeying through life. I had not written or publically talked about my brother since I spoke at his memorial service 19 years before the monologue development. As the monologue suggests, Don was an avid mountain climber, and in January 1995 his weekend expedition in the Canadian Rockies was met with a tragic end. Despite a search team's effort that I was part of, we never found my brother's body due to drifting snow and the vastness of the Columbia Icefields.

For the last two decades, I have often thought about my brother, mostly as a source of inspiration. His desire to live each day fully, push himself, and do what he loved best, has influenced and shaped who I am. However, I had not realized the substantial impact he has had on my identity until I began to explore and create the monologue. We had different trajectories in our lives, yet our passions, quests and desires resonated, and they developed through our brotherly bond. His sense of beauty and awe in things that are bigger than us, influenced the way I see and live in the world. Gazing at the world with eyes fully open and wide awake, we both, in our own ways live(d) Thoreau's romantic idea. We both read *Walden* as undergraduates, and we respectively held the following quotation near our bedsides while at university:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life (2004, p. 97).

My brother lived deeply and optimistically, and the development process of the monologue allowed me to recall that passion for living life fully. A passion, I recognized that resonated with me in closely connected ways. Coincidentally, less than a month after performing the monologue in Melbourne, Australia, my brother's body, frozen in the ice, was discovered by hikers. The ice melting and shifting re-surfaced his frozen body 19 years after his fall in a crevasse. This natural geological process coincided with my inner readiness to develop and perform our stories nearly two decades after his accident.

## **ii. Rehearsal phase**

Much of the work in research-based theatre is self-directed or executed from within the group of co-performers. Designating roles such as writer, director, actor, designer and so on is sometimes incorporated but often challenged when engaging in this collaborative approach to research (Bird et al., 2010; Wager et al., 2009). In the collective, collaborative model of research-based theatre, researchers and artists try to avoid hierarchies in favour of consensus and group decisions (Lea, 2012). In my previous five research-based projects (Belliveau, 2014), I have most often worked in a collaborative manner without a clear designation of theatre leadership roles. In the development and particularly in the rehearsing of this monologue, leadership roles became more defined and I realized how this both freed my artistic work and subverted power dynamics.

After writing the monologue, I shifted my focus on being an actor, and became free to explore the monologue from that one artistic perspective. Not concerning myself with elements such as designing, directing, or coaching enabled me to experiment with voice and movement, and then receive feedback and direction on ways to convey it more effectively from the director(s). Their direction and interpretations added another layer to what I was offering as an actor. Because the creative spirit in our space was one of plussing,<sup>3</sup> the ideas I generated for the monologue were nurtured and pushed forward. I had already worked with the three other artists, so there was a trust built in to experiment and to guide the work towards the aesthetic.

In the process, a reversal of roles emerged in terms of power dynamics, as both Graham and Janice are individuals I have or currently am supervising as PhD students. I guide and direct them in their program. However, in the monologue project, they were directing and guiding me. This shift in power dynamics sometimes required space for the transition, but most often our theatre/artistic backgrounds led us directly into these leadership roles without realization. We let go of our supervisor-student relationship. I became the actor, performing, focussed primarily on my character, and they were the directors, in charge of guiding the creative work. These were important moments, as in those instances, my artist identity as an actor was freed and fully present. And, presumably, their identities as artists were also empowered in taking a leadership, rather than apprenticeship role. This space of freedom allowed me to push the artistic work further as an actor, and reconnect to my artistic identity (Belliveau, 2014).

## **iii. Performing phase**

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<sup>3</sup> Plussing is a term I came across while reading about the work at Pixar (Sims, 2011) where the general rule for animators is that you may only criticize an idea if you *also add a constructive suggestion*. The concept is similar to improvisation, where one says “yes” and moves the initiated idea forward. However, it also adds the notion of “yes, and ...” where listeners push forward the concept by accepting the idea “and” adding another one.

As academics, we often perform identities (Medina et al., 2007). In our various roles as teacher, supervisor, committee member, chair, editor, administrator, collaborator, to name some, we perform different parts of ourselves depending on the given situation. As well, in academic conference sessions, we feel often bound by the formal concept of an academic expert, who sermon-like, delivers a paper on a given topic or area of research in a twenty-minute presentation using a PPT. To step outside this so-called norm of presentation style, and to theatrically perform one's research, challenges the performance expected of us (or that we assume is expected of us) and brings risks and vulnerability. Therefore, the question lingers - why theatrically perform research? And – what conditions might enable performing research to move forward?

Substantial scholarly work in research-based theatre supports how and why this methodology is a viable form of qualitative research.<sup>4</sup> As well, engaging in research within the field of theatre education surely prompts consideration for including theatre when presenting, as most people attending such sessions are familiar with the art form. However, putting oneself in front of peers to perform as an actor in a conventional academic conference opens oneself to vulnerabilities. To perform as an actor *and* academic raises the stakes, as you expose your artistic and academic prowess to your audience of peers. Nonetheless, theatrically performing research is arguably what lies at the heart of research-based theatre. If artistically doing is the nub of this research work, in what ways might one prepare to encounter the artistic-research challenge?

In performing “Brothers” at the Melbourne conference, two significant conditions helped to address (and mitigate) the feeling of vulnerability. First, I realized the significant impact of using a theatre space as the venue. The session where I performed was a fully equipped black box theatre that included raked audience seating, theatre lighting, theatre curtains in the wings and back, and good acoustics.<sup>5</sup> The use of this space shifted how I was allowed to play with the monologue and how the audience likely perceived the work. The theatre enabled the creative work to grow and expand, as the space provided an environment where the monologue could be contained. My body and voice did not need to be subdued or reduced to suit a non-theatre space, where most often this kind of work is shared.<sup>6</sup> It was as if I could extend my arms and voice more fully, and to the other extreme whisper and lift but one finger to capture a moment. My training and experience as an actor were given permission to fully exist in the space. As audience members listened, I could pause, be in the moment, and allow for metaphors and gestures to linger. A theatre environment allows time and space to travel, for simultaneous moments to co-exist on stage, and as an actor I can swiftly shift from one setting to another with the slight turn of my head or body. The imagination can more readily be ignited, and multiple meanings within the performance text can reach the audience due to a more conducive and amenable space for this research approach.

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Ackroyd & O’Toole, 2010; Beck et al., 2011; Belliveau, 2006; Belliveau & Lea, 2011; Lea, 2012; 2013; 2014; Goldstein, 2011; Saldana, 2011; Sallis, 2010; Sinclair, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The theatre space is called Open Stage at the University of Melbourne.

<sup>6</sup> In my experience, most often conference sessions, performances included, are held in classroom-like spaces or lecture halls that are not conducive to creating a theatre-like environment.



A second realization I discovered while performing was how a felt experience became more present than in past presentations of this genre, due largely to being more artistically prepared. Certainly, the text emerged from a place of feeling and about a brotherly connection that I cherish and value. However, with this project, I was able to dedicate a significant amount of time and energy to carefully memorize and rehearse the monologue, so that while performing I was present with the ideas, the acting, and the heart (Leggo, 2007). Also, as previously mentioned, the inclusion of other artists to direct and shape the piece from an outside perspective enriched, layered, and deepened the performance. The dedicated time commitment to develop and rehearse pushed the work to another level of engagement. Feedback from various audience members in Melbourne and Vancouver<sup>7</sup> was that the monologue provided a felt experience. It offered a space where viewers connected to their own feelings about family, close friends, and mentors. Their responses were less about the monologue generating ideas, and more about witnessing and resonating heartfelt moments through the performance.

The time commitment to fully prepare a theatre piece is often impossible for artist-researchers to justify within a university setting, and as a result performances shared at conferences are often under-rehearsed. Also, the technicalities of remembering your lines and cues, being aware of the audience, sight lines, lighting, and vocal projection, often leads to 'getting it right' instead of truly living in the moment. In addition, most academic conferences emphasize and foreground ideas, not valuing embodied work. Therefore, to dedicate yourself fully in creating a performed piece of research for a conference can feel like a Sisyphus endeavour. Time and space are but two conditions to address ways of bringing performed research closer to its potential. For theatre practitioners this is nothing new, though for those of us working in interdisciplinary ways, it is a reminder that we need a full commitment to both the art and research to best serve the field of research-based theatre.

## **Conclusion**

As the field of research-based theatre continues to expand in both artistic and scholarly ways, it seems incumbent that as artists-researchers we engage in the practice of *doing* the work. The reflections that I share above are but glimpses of learning that might emerge when one participates in developing, rehearsing, and performing a theatre-based research monologue. Scholarly works that analyse and theorize research-based theatre approaches help us situate and define the field, making it more robust. However, critical reflections of experiential engagements of creating and performing provide another vital form of knowing and advances this artistic form of research in new directions.

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<sup>7</sup> The monologue was also performed at the University of British Columbia in the Faculty of Education.  
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**Bio**

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