

REASONS FOR BEING: STORYTELLING THE CREATION OF A PLAY ABOUT YOUTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

MONICA PRENDERGAST, TRUDY PAULUTH-PENNER *University of Victoria*

ABSTRACT. This article reflects on an arts-based Social Science and Humanities Research Council funded study (2021-24), entitled ‘Youth mental health performance: How young people respond to portrayals of mental health, resilience, and well-being in and through drama and performance creation.’ Secondary theatre students as co-researcher artists from Riverside Secondary School in Coquitlam, BC were invited to explore how mental health was portrayed in Canadian Theatre for Young Audiences plays. Participants responded to these portrayals through play analysis workshops and collective theatre devising and performance. This paper highlights the voices of the participants, making their thoughts and impressions the centrepiece of the paper. Methodology integrated ethno-theatre/drama, research-based theatre, and poetic inquiry processes. This study aligned with university and school district ethics protocols.

RAISONS D'ÊTRE : RACONTER LA CRÉATION D'UNE PIÈCE DE THÉÂTRE SUR LA JEUNESSE ET LA SANTÉ MENTALE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article propose une réflexion sur l'étude financée par le CRSH (2021-2024), intitulée : « Youth mental health performance: How young people respond to portrayals of mental health, resilience, and well-being in and through drama and performance creation. » Des élèves de théâtre au secondaire en Colombie-Britannique ont exploré les représentations de la santé mentale dans des œuvres canadiennes de théâtre destinées au jeune public. Les participant·e·s ont répondu à ces représentations à travers des ateliers d'analyse dramaturgique ainsi que des processus collectifs de création et de performance théâtrales. L'article met en évidence les voix, les réflexions, et les impressions des participant·e·s. La méthodologie adoptée combine les approches de l'ethnodrame, du théâtre basé sur la recherche et de l'enquête poétique.

Our paper begins with selected quotations from participants' devised script, entitled 'I'm Fine.'

Raison d'être:

We all need to blow off steam. Some need alone time to self-regulate.

Many things can be true at once.

Reputations can be on the line, online.

Actions have consequences.

We have all been stuck feeling like "not enough" and the negative impacts of this analysis can be long-lasting.

Chosen family can be lifesaving for young people who face discrimination at home.

We use "I'm fine" to stop honest conversations like these. Being seen, and heard, is something everyone seeks to make them feel valued.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a 70 per cent increase in rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation among youth aged 15 to 24 years (Jones et al., 2021). Adolescence is one of the most optimal periods to intervene with mental health promotion (World Health Organization, 2021). The performing arts – including theatre and the dramatic arts – play a vital role in the development of secondary students' mental health, well-being, and resilience (Conrad, 2020).

The study's methodological design integrated Research-based Theatre (RbT) – the theatricalization of data – with the critical and empathetic principles of Poetic Inquiry (PI). As noted by Lea and Belliveau (2016): "When theatricalizing data, researchers show, not tell, the results of their research, creating a three-dimensional (re)presentation of their research data" (p. 7). In our study, participants' reflections (data) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, analyzed, and reshaped into their own theatre performance. RbT, then, provides opportunity for critique, meaningful realizations, and cathartic responses for audiences and performers.

PI was used to synthesize experience in a direct and affective manner, reconfirm or reconstruct experiences, and to elicit emotional responses. Herein the researcher is interconnected with research participants as their own affective responses inform the poems. Flint (2024) emphasizes that PI is an analytical method as "research poems do more than communicate

research findings; they are part of condensing, crystallizing and interpreting research insights” (p. 6).

We intentionally focused on poetic transcription, utilized in this study as a method for creating found poetry from research participants’ documents. Extracts from existing texts were re-structured and re-ordered to create poems (Byrne, 2017). Poetic transcription also reflects the voices of the researcher and the sources used in the dialogue (Flint, 2024).

This study was structured in two parts: play analysis and devising. Next, we briefly reflect on the processes, with student responses integrated into the researchers’ poems.

PLAY ANALYSIS

The play analysis phase of this project included a selection process involving the review of over 125 Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) plays from a literature search, narrowed down to 10 plays which were then used in a pilot project carried out at a high school in Saanich, BC (see Pauluth-Penner & Prendergast, 2023). Feedback from the pilot project made us reconsider the number of plays we were working with, which we reduced to three: *Still/Falling* by Rachel Aberle (2022); *Selfie* by Christine Quintana (2020); and *This is How We Got Here* by Keith Barker (2017). We watched a video of *Still/Falling* and listened to the other two plays on the PlayME podcast from CBC Radio.

In this phase, students engaged in researcher-facilitated play analysis workshops. They read the plays, created still images, and engaged in reflective discussions which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture students’ authentic language. Transcripts were further analyzed to identify prominent themes. Themes reported by several students exemplified collective resonance with the play’s characters, demonstrating mature sensitivity, respect, and impressive depth of understanding of the various mental health scenarios that emerged within the plays. The following Haiku found poems reflect themes from each play analyzed.

Still/Falling, a solo play, follows a protagonist as they struggle with growing anxiety that leads to acts of self-harm. Students’ comments are rendered into Haiku from transcripts (see Prendergast, 2016; Prendergast et al., 2009).

Feeling overwhelmed:

*everything felt,
like way too much you just want
need to be alone*

Anxiety:

*i really liked the
attention to detail, as
i have anxiety*

*she has good people
but she's still struggling 'cause
people just don't know*

Self-perceptions / Esteem:

*mostly self-hate thing
"i hate myself, i'm ugly"
"i'm not good enough"*

*when i'm in my head
it's not about myself, it's
what people think*

Panic attacks:

*sometimes things just happen
there isn't always a reason
sometimes it just happens*

*it comes from nowhere
everything comes crashing
your skin feels too tight*

Bouncing back:

*panic attacks don't just go
away like snap...a day or
even two days in bed*

*bouncing back can be
coping mechanism but
i think it's too much*

The second play, *Selfie*, examines the aftereffects of a party where the protagonist is sexually assaulted and subsequently faces both cyberbullying and in-person harassment after choosing to report the incident to the police. Student comments on this play were as follows:

Accountability / choices / consequences:

*i hate attitude
"can't hold me accountable"
you are making choice*

Realism / relatability:

*interesting how
not everything was just
in black and white*

*it didn't end with
"oh, everything's okay"
things happen not okay*

The play's language:

*it's the way adults
think kids work online, one photo
and it's everywhere*

*not how teenagers
talk, that's not what it's like
not how people talk*

Party scene:

*you have this sinking
feeling in your stomach like
oh, it's so sad*

Consent issues / victimization:

*i feel like she got
raped...the bigger picture of
consent for females*

Parents' role:

*where are the parents?
"ah, you threw a party!" is
elephant in room*

Finally, the third play, *This is How We Got Here*, written by Indigenous playwright Keith Barker, looks at the tough topic of youth suicide. It follows parents who have separated after the death of their son by suicide and are navigating the one-year anniversary of his passing. Students' comments on this play are as follows:

Male gender roles / attitudes:

“we have to be men”

“we have to not feel things”

i didn't like that

Grieving processes:

his wife was grieving

he was acting superior

his grief was better

“i'm a man, that's how

i deal with it (alcohol)”

everybody angry

Processing pain:

it's self-destructive

he went and drowned his pain, but

the mother's in a lot of pain

processing feelings

is intense...everyone

not really themselves

Intergenerational trauma:

that kind of trauma

intergenerational trauma

prevalent in that community

Mental health:

*I just think that this
story is more about grieving
than suicidal child*

*it struck a memory
anxiety comes with grief
it creeps up on you*

Realism / relatable:

*in the end, Paul says,
“do you want to sit with me
for a while?” “yeah, sure”*

*I just want to vent
just want to be in the moment
looking for comfort*

Significance of the fox (who appears to the mother as the dead son, in her imagination):

*the fox brought an egg
it was very heartwarming
her son reincarnated*

The student comments in these haiku reflect an understanding of the dynamics of anxiety, the consequences of a party gone wrong (a theme which became an important through-line in their own play), and the complexities of grief. It became evident in these conversations and transcripts that students were willing to engage deeply, relating the plays to their personal experiences of anxiety, grief, depression, and other mental health challenges. All of these insights supported the next stage of the project, the devising process, which involved the creation of an original play.

DEVISING PROCESS

Students from Riverside Secondary School in Port Coquitlam, BC participated in a series of researcher-facilitated play devising workshops. First, students developed rules of engagement that outlined how they would work collectively as a theatre company. Secondly, they brainstormed and documented themes to guide their scene development.

In the devising process students were encouraged to think about statements as starting points for scenes. These were recorded on folded strips of paper. Students were separated into five pairs and asked to develop 10 rounds of quick improvisations from these statements. Then, students narrowed the scene selections to three. They continued to share and refine the scenes for the final script.

FINAL SCRIPT SYNOPSIS

Students collectively devised their play, *I'm Fine*, reflecting their views on mental health. They performed it at their school's drama festival where it was selected to compete in the provincial drama festival hosted by the Association of BC Drama Educators (ABCDE), which took place at Douglas College in New Westminister.

In preparation for the drama festival, we needed to create a scene to share at the festival preview – this would ultimately become the first scene in the final version of the play. In it, a character named Martha stands centre stage as family members (parents and siblings) stick colourful sticky notes on her body. Pictures from the party, which Martha was not allowed to throw, have been posted online, ousting the secret. The sticky notes that her family paste onto her body say things such as, “I thought you knew better,” “I told you so,” and “What were you thinking”? Later, when Martha goes to school, her peers do the same, saying, “I’m in so much trouble because of you,” “Did you hear? Everyone’s talking about it!” and (sarcastically), “Great party, Martha!” The group of actors move around Martha, repeating lines repeatedly until she screams “STOP!” The actors melt offstage as a teacher comes on to ask Martha if she’s feeling okay, followed by her friends running on and removing the sticky notes, letting them drop to the stage like falling leaves. She embraces one friend, then her best friend Nancy (who posted the party photos) tries to apologize. Martha accepts a hug from Nancy but says she’s going to need some time before she can really forgive her for what she’s done. The scene, while lightly fictionalized and with name changes, was based on a students’ real-life experience.

STUDENT-DEvised PLAY SYNOPSIS

This synopsis begins with a research response poem from script text followed by scene synopsis as presented at the provincial drama festival and concluding reflections.

No thanks. I'm fine... I'm not hungry.

Are you ok? Your eyes...

Trust me, guys. I'm fine. Really, I'm FINE!

The truth is I'm not fine

I'm so sick of it. I just want to hang out
with my friends

AND

Be Normal

The staging of the play was simple, with six blocks re-used as chairs and benches in a number of scenes. At times students also used these blocks to stand on. Actors wore black shirts and pants or leggings. The only other props were red cups for the party scene, cell phones, and coloured sticky notes.

Scene 1

Students enter the stage from the audience, with recorded music playing (the song, 'Crazy'). They greet each other as if before school, then face front (see Figure 1.) and share the following lines:

1. I thought you knew better.
2. I tried so hard to fit in.
3. What will my parents think?
4. I wish I could remember.
5. I was so jealous.
6. No one will believe me.
7. What are you doing Saturday?
8. You're a liar.
9. I told you so.
10. They're all looking at me.



FIGURE 1: *Opening of show*

Scene 2

The party: The cast is at a party with the host and others taking selfies and videos. There is drinking, dancing, and one actor breaks away to give a monologue about how the party is triggering her anxiety.

Scene 3

Classroom: A student presentation day in the classroom. A student is struck with severe anxiety, tries to back out unsuccessfully, panics, and runs out.

Scene 4

Social media contagion: Students mill about as music plays, and we hear “bings” as they each receive a text revealing that the photos and videos of the party have been posted online. Finally, the party host, Martha, stops centre stage and says, “Oh shit”!

Scene 5

Yoga class: The news begins that a video of the party is circulating on social media; a jealous friend admits she posted the video.

Scene 6

School lunchroom: Gossip spreads as people view the video and photos on their phones. The friend who posted the video is confronted. Martha feels betrayed (see Figure 2).

Scene 7

Sticky notes: Martha is covered with sticky notes with negative statements from parents, peers, and fellow classmates.

Scene 8

Dance class: Students are excited, looking forward to class. The teacher tells a student in cruel fashion that she does not have the right body type for dance. An eating disorder is revealed through a monologue.



FIGURE 2: *Betrayal*

Scene 9

Two girls, one asks the other out on a date. The second girl accepts but worries about her parents' reaction. Her friend tells us her parents are supportive of her sexuality.

Scene 10

Four friends meet after school on bench: One girl is clearly upset, her friends probe her until she says, "You know what happened last summer with my father? Well, it happened again." The friends call her brave and surround her with loving support (see Figure 3).



FIGURE 3: *Friends*

Scene 11

Poem: Actors in pairs say the following lines while miming being punched in the belly, moving upstage. Then, they turn and place sticky notes on each other repeating these lines. Finally, they move downstage yelling lines, pause, and slowly remove the sticky notes, ending in hugs.

1. Who do you think you are?
2. Who cares it's just one time?
3. Who did you run off with?
4. Who told you?
5. Who are you trying to impress?
6. What are you wearing?
7. What did you tell him?
8. What is your problem?
9. What were you thinking?
10. Whatever?
11. When are you going to grow up?
12. When will you have it finished?
13. When are you going to learn?
14. When is it going to get easier?
15. When are you going to have time for me?

Scene 12

Audience address: The performance ends with actors forming a final tableau followed by a direct out-of-character address to the audience. One by one, actors walk to the front, breaking the fourth wall. Seated on the stage edge they offer the following lines:

1. Dear Parents - There was a time in your life when you were just like me...
2. You were just a teenager with anger and anxiety and nowhere to put it.
3. Dear Teachers - Please try to understand that it can be really hard to ask for help...
4. I know I'm not the best student in the class but...
5. I'm working really hard.
6. Dear Parents - Sometimes I wish you could walk in my shoes...
7. Technology brings out the best and the worst of us.
8. Hey - We don't really know each other but I see you in the halls and I wonder...do you stress about the same things I do?
9. Dear Classmates - Please give me a second chance.
10. Dear Friends - thank you for listening when you have problems too...
11. Dear Audience...
12. This is what it's really like.



FIGURE 4: Final moment of *I'm Fine*



FIGURE 5: Talkback following the show

POST-PRODUCTION REFLECTIONS AND EVALUATIONS

Student participants, family, audience members, and the school drama teacher reflected upon the study/project components through post-production Likert-ratings in questionnaires, surveys, and open-ended

commentaries. The project met the overall goal to create a collaborative context wherein youth could openly analyze how mental health is represented in selected Canadian TYA plays, while also expressing their views on mental health through their collectively devised play, *I'm Fine*. Students expressed that this project was particularly meaningful for them, that engagement in the dramatic theatre processes enabled them to authentically as co-researchers/artists be the experts of their own lived experience. Engaging in creative explorations, students could express themselves while stimulating open dialogue amongst their peers, thereby creating new understandings around the complexities of mental health for youth.

The observations from this study align with the pedagogy of research-based theatre's pedagogy, which fosters collective dialogue and deepens understanding of complex and challenging subjects, such as mental health, with, for, and about youth.

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MONICA PRENDERGAST is Professor of drama/theatre education at the University of Victoria. She has written or co-edited 12 books, and many articles and chapters in top-ranked journals and books in her field. mprender@uvic.ca

TRUDY PAULUTH-PENNER, an assistant adjunct professor in Applied Theatre and sessional instructor in Health Information Science at the University of Victoria, has implemented arts-in-health initiatives across diverse contexts. troods@uvic.ca

MONICA PRENDERGAST est professeure en « drama/theatre education » à l'Université de Victoria. Elle est l'autrice ou la coéditrice de douze ouvrages, en plus d'avoir écrit de nombreux articles et chapitres publiés dans des revues et ouvrages prestigieux dans son domaine. mprender@uvic.ca

TRUDY PAULUTH-PENNER, professeure auxiliaire en Théâtre appliqué et chargée de cours en « Health Information Science » à l'Université de Victoria, a mis en œuvre plusieurs initiatives liant les arts et la santé dans des contextes variés. troods@uvic.ca