

# Teaching stories: A reflection on teaching residencies

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## Author's biography

Kathryn Ricketts has been working for the past 26 years in the field of movement and visual arts. Her work has been presented throughout Europe, South America, Africa and Canada. She ran her own company (ricketts dance co) in Copenhagen, Denmark, and later a three-year professional dance training program called MainDance, as well as her professional company Plan B Dance Productions. For the past 10 years Ricketts has been working with a focus on social /political issues within arts-based performance residencies. Ricketts is currently engaged in the Arts Education Doctoral program at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. Her research involves working with *Embodied Poetic Narrative* as a means of exploring 'identity' and 'place' within marginalized groups.

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## Abstract

*This paper hinges on moments of reciprocity and receptivity that occur during two teaching residencies in England and Canada. Although these reflections are sourced from two residencies and provoke thoughts both specific and general regarding the tensions and integrations of pedagogy and art practices, they act as catalysts to further inquiry as I continue my work through a broad range of residencies and build further relationships with teachers in a wide scope of contexts. The paper raises key issues concerning how we play the roles of artist, teacher and researcher, and how the artist/teacher/researcher (the a/r/t/ograpist) wrestles with the challenges of integrating public pedagogy with practice. The paper reflects on how this inquiry provokes me to engage in these residencies with the curiosity and passion I bring to the stage, and in turn asks how to balance this with the thoughtfulness and responsibility I employ in the classroom. The two residencies – New Vlc, London, England and Windsor High School, Vancouver, Canada – represent the values of silence and listening as pedagogical practices. In both residencies the students call us to a place of reciprocity whereby activity emerges through a respectful discourse. These stories speak to patience, trust and the courage needed to take the silence and begin the listening as a necessary factor in our shared (teacher/student) moments together.*

## Introduction

I am a graduate student on the intense journey of articulating a methodology called 'embodied-poetic-narrative'. I have a particular interest in issues of identity and place with marginalized groups such as immigrants, seniors and youth at risk. My practice is dance and I meet education with a belief that art practice must be embedded in all that we do. As teachers this includes the sharing and modeling of knowledge. In the first year of my masters degree I arranged a variety of research sites in and around London with the intention of testing on foreign ground a methodology based on these principles. One of the sites was New Vic College in East London where I taught a group of approximately 15 students who had returned to school several years after dropping out. They were trying to finish high school long after many of their friends had graduated, and they carried with them the remnants of substance abuse and violent interventions – both physical and emotional. I was to spend several hours per day with these students for two weeks, ending with a scheduled performance, along with other schools, in a 400-seat theatre at the end of the residency. My agreement with the host teacher was challenging; it involved me leading a meaningful creative process, culminating in a well-rehearsed piece, with students who had absolutely no interest in being present in the room.

As we approached the site my host/coordinator attempted to prepare me for the class by stating that the demographic was the most economically challenged in all of England and added that the behavioural issues that come with this condition were not exempted here. My interest, I claimed, was to work with those on the margins, and this residency provided me with yet another opportunity. For me, however, it became more than just

an opportunity. This residency and the one to follow were to become exemplars of the shift that I believe needs to happen between researcher, subjects and sites. In both stories a transformation occurred whereby positions and location shifted allowing ultimate reciprocity between all participants, a key factor in what I would consider to be an optimum learning space. Bhabha (1998) writes of this as a 'diagonal' event:

The true void – out of balance, caught between one temporality and another – becomes such a gathering place that stands in an oblique relation to itself and others. As a 'diagonal' event it is, at once, a meeting place of modes and meanings, and a site of the contentious struggles of perspective and interpretation. (p. 30)

The context of creating a performable piece was merely a catalyst to the cultivation of a space of sharing – sharing personal stories, vocal, written and imagistic. These stories are rooted in the teller but tethered to all of us and as they surface we begin to experience the intersections that touch us deeply – quickening tolerance, compassion and empathy.

Once this matrix of personal meaning-making has been constructed, we then begin to sequence the material into dance/theatre vignettes. At this point in the process there is a sense of surrendering authorship as the piece actually *makes itself* almost invisibly, like the *ouija board* piece moving slowly towards *yes* or *no* with listening fingers lightly resting on its surface. In this way of combining research and artist, I echo a methodology generated by a team of scholars from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada led by Rita Irwin called *a/r/tography*. In this methodology, through an active inquiry, the roles of artist, researcher and teacher are hyphenated creating an

interdisciplinarity and wholeness with our work/play. This is referred to as a fusion of knowing, doing and making:

Theory as a/r/tography creates an imaginative turn by theorizing or explaining phenomena through aesthetic experiences that integrates knowing, doing and making: experiences that simultaneously value technique and content through acts of inquiry; experiences that value complexity and difference within a third space. (Irwin, 2004, p. 31)

Heidegger (cited in Bowers, 2005) proposes that language *speaks us*: to clarify, we are caught in kind of determinism within our creative acts that invites, at some point, an act of surrendering to an invisible and uncontrollable force. Language *speaks us*, as we *speak language*. Similarly, I have come to understand that in the process of creating work through the generation of personal stories – under a shared and collectively chosen issue – that at a certain point the dance/theatre has a mind/heart of its own. Bowers (2005) writes of this when talking about the combination of culture and personal stories: “Recognizing the tension, which avoids representing culture in terms of generic or linguistic determinism, can be understood most readily in terms of an insight attributed to Martin Heidegger that ‘language thinks us as we think within the language’.” (p. 44)

*The Warm Countries We Are Lucky Enough To Teach In* and *Stormy Weather* are two stories which are also catalysts urging myself as researcher to enter into an arena of ‘oneness’ and to cast aside the location “I” and “other”, offering the stories mined from deep below and placing *my* fingers on the *ouija piece* alongside my students. Lambert (cited in Kretchmar, 2005) likens this to the experience of a team of

rowers and the sense of one in this activity, calling forth a sense of immediacy and reciprocity:

There is no friction: we ride the natural cadence of our strokes, a continuous cycle. The crew breathes as one. Inhale on the recovery, exhale as we drive our blades through the water, inspiration and expression. In. Out. Row with one body and so with one mind. Nothing exists but: Here. Now. (pp. 124-125)

If I can allow myself to enter a space of vulnerability and take the risks I ask of my students, will I dispel scepticism and replace it with authentic engagement?

### **Residency 1: *Warm Countries We Are Lucky Enough to Teach In***

This report covers a two-week residency with a group of young adults upgrading their academic standards for entry level to university. This was undoubtedly a marginalized group with challenging circumstances; violence at home, low economic status and substance abuse. Despite these socio-economic challenges they were able to come to school every day although sometimes two hours late after a host of complications beyond my imagination. My primary objective was to work from their issues not what I may project to be their issues. When conducting an introductory circle, they all replied that they were not interested in dance and after a few personal offerings I could discern that their notion of *blame* would be an excellent theme. I responded to their introductions by saying I was honoured to be working with them and that I would probably change their minds about dance.

They were pleased with the theme but sceptical of dance. We began our warm up with loud music and rigorous movement mixed with 'bratty banter' (it seemed like the route to go). They came along with me

accepting the challenge and enjoying the atmosphere, which was being carefully cultivated. No one could tell or could care less that I was scared to death. This was by far the most challenging group I had worked with to date. Everyday I continued to build their stamina, develop physical skills i.e. fluidity, dynamics, musicality, strength and agility with broad sweeping movements, exploring level changes, three dimensionality, rhythmic shifts and jump phrases, of course accompanied with loud raucous music. I was able to make them move, sweat, hoot and holler despite their scepticism. Occasionally they were combusting with newfound energy taking moments to jump up against walls and skid across the floor and at other times they returned to the familiarity of lethargy, but always complaining about the repetitions, the rigor, the duration. I believed that there was a secrecy to the endorphins rejuvenating their bodies and they were embarrassed and unsure of how public they wanted to be revealing these welcomed shifts in their physical being.

It was a dance in itself navigating the student's erratic landscapes of engagement – some in the room, some out. I remember teaching a group of heroin addicts in Denmark where in the middle of class a nurse would arrive to administer methadone to some of the students. They would disappear for a few moments and then return to class. We would carry on with the class as if it was only a sip of water needed. My New Vlc students would come later after looking after their two-year-old sister (their mother, too drunk to get out of bed). They moved through narrow spaces of tension and violence, finding solace with the puppy-like love in the room. They would sit on laps braiding hair, or carefully draw pen tattoos, then revert to punching, kicking, pushing, insulting – just enough to have an edge yet soft enough to return to the cuddles.



Figure 1. Moving through narrow spaces of tension, love...

We were all alchemists mixing regret with anger and longing but most importantly with a belief that compassion can be the underbelly of everything. Slowly through the days I felt the atmosphere cohere, we were creating an ecosystem. I was 'Kaffrin from Canadaw' and together we were creating a structure where exposure was allowed, invited. A poem, a song and a few very great moves, then refining, re-writing, repeating...

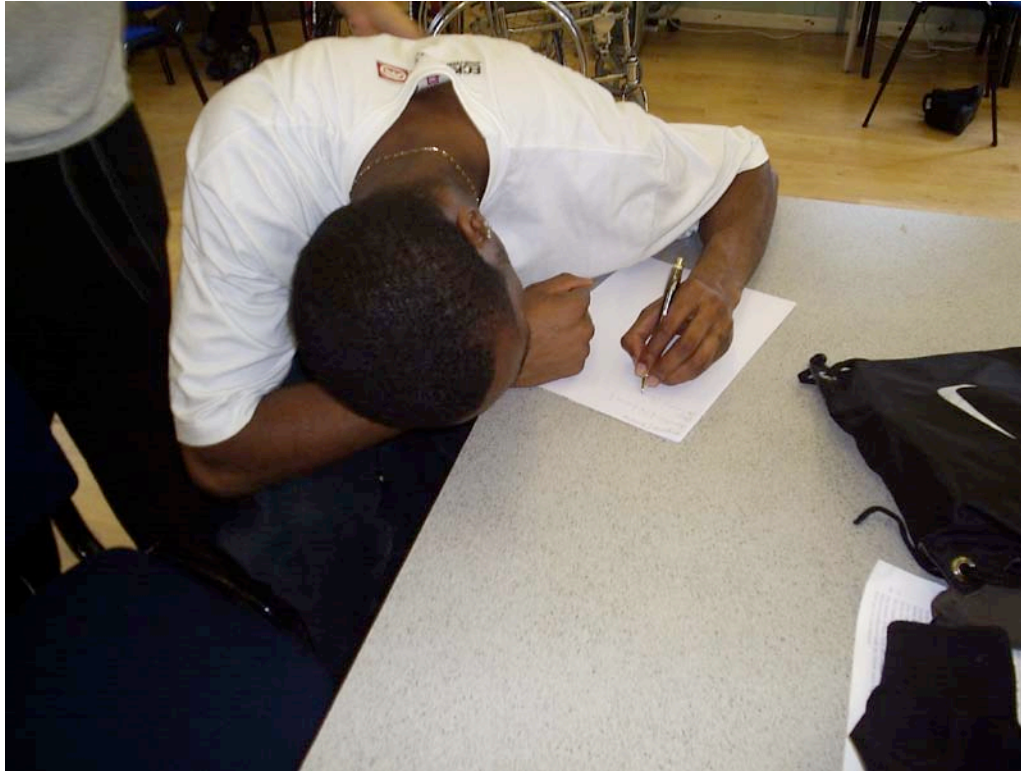


Figure 2. Together we were creating a structure...

The group began to dress for the class, some with special hats, others with chain medallions and others with very tight dance pants and mid torso 'tanks'. I was honoured; they were inviting me in and celebrating this transition. As the show drew nearer the tensions and heat of production descended on our 'camp'; the songs needed music, stories needed to be memorized, and movement needed counts. This contrivance of structures brought an unwelcome challenge to the space and threatened my newly formed relationship with the students. Repetition and rigor were necessary. I needed to assume, as a leap of faith, that respect for me would prevail but friendship might dissolve as I demanded punctuality, clarity, endurance and consistency. Somewhere I am sure they understood that I demanded it only because I knew they



were capable of it. They came every day; they complained constantly, resisted belligerently, and yet came every day. Their clothes seemed cleaner, aftershave began to linger in the room, and they stayed during breaks. I was again honoured and very grateful that I was able to read the signals and hold them close as I grinded through the physical/practical challenges.

The last day of rehearsal was the most difficult; transitions, cues, entrances and exits, all the 'stuff' that is considered hugely insignificant in their lives that seem to work in broad sweeping sketches. Like the reckless impulses of Jackson Pollock's paintings, these students are the 'Pollocks' of East London splashing energy with reckless random impulses. The rehearsal was ended with a final task, to record the stories that would be used in the performance. The time was right, the environment was ripe with trust and charged with the excitement of a pending show. A necessity of limited budget and resources forced me to record their voices in a broad sweep around the circle, overlapping voices not by editing with expensive digital equipment but instead as I moved slowly with my recording device cueing with my hands when to speak and when to stop. The students were exhausted and with their lounging, cuddling postures they listened to the instructions; "talk about blame – start talking when my hand goes up – stop when the hand goes down". The stories flowed with ease. The week had been fantastic, it was indeed a very warm country we were in, the time zone was our pumping hearts, the wires of communication were wide-open eyes beaming support and respect across the circle.



Figure 3. Exhausted, lounging, cuddling postures - the lines of communication were open...

Their stories, emblems of their scars and their pride, flowed readily, with ease and generosity. Got it! I pressed stop and whisked it off to an on-site technician from the college who would mix it with our music overnight.

### *The day of performance*

Technical rehearsal was scheduled at 8:00 A.M., an hour of the day they rarely consciously witness. They were all there, complaining, resisting, insulting, but they were all there. Moving onto the stage for rehearsal harkened two important memories; one a film from 1996 and the other a dance rehearsal with my company in Egypt.

*Memory 1: This memory is from the film “Best Shot” which was changed from the more politically mischievous name “Hoosiers”. The movie centres on a high school basketball team, which against all odds made it to some kind of championships. Outrageously nervous, the team stands shivering on the official court, their gaze scanning the seating capacity with wide eyes; they are deer caught in a conceptual headlight. The coach throws a measuring tape at the team captain and tells him to measure the distance of the hoop to the floor, then emphasizes the distance is the same as their cozy home town gym: “let’s get to work.”*

*Memory 2: My company is performing in an international festival in Cairo. We have arrived at the Royal Theatre and the dancers are standing like the basketball players, deer on the stage feeling the headlights. I am 50 rows back. A local tea merchant makes his way over to me, he has bare feet and is wearing a long white gown, an ornate silver canteen is strapped to his back with a hose that winds around to the front of his neck. A tray with small empty glasses is extending from one hand. I assume he is asking me if I would like some tea. I am about to scream in absolute overwhelming joy and fear combined – what exoticism, what luck! Instead I shake my head and tell my dancers to use the second velvet wing to enter and to take six extra steps to compensate for the large stage. I have made the measurement from hoop to floor and it is identical to the integrity and commitment we have at home. I ground them and myself with details of our work – it is the passport to my safety as a foreigner, anywhere... anytime.*

I relay the basketball story to the students deciding that this is a better choice of the two. They get through the technical rehearsal but not

without the cultivation of some nagging doubts. Will they meet the performing space with the reverence it deserves? Will they feel the headlights?

### *The Performance*

The students take the stage with a quiet grace, honesty emanates from every pore. They suddenly seem soft and yet there is strength from the core as they move from scene to scene flawlessly. I am watching but my pounding heart is masking my experience. I am careful to call sound and light cues and to disguise the tight throat and shallow breath, sweaty palms and restless weight shifts. They have finished on a single pinpoint of spot lighting illuminating the face of an angel (who is normally cursing and swearing throughout rehearsals) singing her story while the rest of the students extend their hands to touch hers (a quiet high five). Electric charges of faith and empowerment are transmitted between them on stage but we know what it is. The light fades with her lingering last note and the audience jumps to their feet. It is so clear when performance becomes so much more than the accumulated efforts of creation, rehearsal and presentation and yet the only way an audience can indicate acknowledgement and appreciation is by their piercing silence during the performance and to stand up howling and slamming hands together when it is all over. As creators and performers, we have to accept this limitation with a certain amount of grace. There is so much more to be said and if we are lucky and can catch this as the audience filters out, then we can excuse this limitation even more.

On that night, I had that chance; one of the students came over to me and said “Well Kaffrin from Canadaw, you did change our minds!”

### Residency 2: ***Stormy Weather***



“The teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class but negotiates the curriculum with the students and begins with their language, themes and understandings.” (Shor, 1996, p. 5)

I am currently a guest artist in residence at a high school collaborating with an exceptional drama teacher and an extraordinary grade 11 class. This residency locates me as both artist and teacher and allows me to both experience and witness relationships with students in the creative process. I am navigating the white-water rapids of resistance and diversity. It has been a gift to be working with such a progressive and sensitive teacher who is working to shift the grounds of conservatism in education. The honesty and humility I feel from her teaching practice matched with an outstanding rigor and vigour inspires me to come earlier and stay longer on the days that I teach. For months we have been on a journey with Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and as is customary with my teaching I am sure I must be the biggest learner in the room. *Twelfth Night* begins with a massive storm at sea resulting in the main characters Viola and Sebastian struggling to survive as they are cast from the ship to the angry sea. My identity as a choreographer/dancer/teacher was to take the central image imagined for the play and use it to animate (kinaesthetically) parts of the play – develop skills, research material, construct sequences and prepare for production. The ship, the storm and the sea became vital in my prosaic quest as I began to write about the intricate relationships between the teacher, the learner, the environment and the curriculum. Within this complexity lie also the tensions among the sub-categories of these roles: the generalist and the specialist classroom teacher, the professional practicing artist and the community facilitator, the recreational and career-focused drama student. Feeling lost within the white-water rapids

of some of education's hegemonic constructs is, I am sure, quite common. I commend the teachers who are able to sustain their standards and vision despite the walls that sometimes move closer. How can all crew members feel secure on board the ships that heel and bay in extreme conditions of class sizes, diversity of student needs, and diminishing resources, emotional, administrative and financial? In the case of my current residency, I am inspired and reassured that there are teachers that do ensure the safety of integrity within the storms present in their working environments. As the loving siblings Viola and Sebastian must find their way through the turmoil of a violent sea, how do we account for the losses in our teaching environments? How do we link faith and trust when there may be critical events or negligence beyond this environment? Sumara (2001) writes about these merged borders between life and the learning environment:

... the Commonplace Book activities, as described in the reading experiences presented earlier, show that the common-sense understanding of what constitutes self/other, mind/body, personal/collective, fiction/non-fiction, literary/non-literary do not exist as tidy demarcated categories but, instead, exist ambiguously and fluidly in relation to one another. Most significantly, these activities illuminate the processes by which human beings experiences are necessarily organized by remembered, currently lived, and imagined identifications and relationships. (p. 168)

As usual with Shakespeare the lyricism of his complex shifting of identities, intention, perception and meaning inevitably filters down to a central location – Love. And as we shift in our relationships in the classrooms, we move through the ties that are tightened and slackened off, as we would adjust the sails in unpredictable winds to achieve optimum motion forward. I have watched sailors curse and stomp when just as the adjustments are made to shift course, strategizing a new tack

to capture the wind – the wind shifts. Navigating involves duelling with forces that are unknown. When the best we can do in controlling our environments is to recognize patterning and deduce a predictability, all of this is to no avail when we come to the storm of hormones that gusts and blusters within teenage bodies as youth navigate their own paths with equally strong forces. As Arnold (1867) describes so beautifully, nothing is predictable:

### **Dover Beach**

The sea is calm to-night.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits;--on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

How are teacher-student relationships built strong enough to weather rough conditions but light enough to release, to understand and embrace the temporality and unpredictability of their own conditions? Students who may usurp the greater part of emotional resources one year are in the following year met with compassion; as if a fog has lifted, the care and conscientiousness that has always been there, despite the cost, is revealed. With other students there is sometimes an imposed anonymity, a kind of anaesthetizing for the sake of emotional sustainability.



The fulcrum shifts. The ropes are loosened and my work with the students starts with the initial stages of introducing the notion and possibility of embodiment and orienting them to my language, style, personality and most importantly, my code of ethics with the working environment of the theatre. At the same time, some of our accountability is determined by the formal and informal assessment required by teachers' public school environments. Compromises are also made due to exhaustion or for the sake of securing ease in classroom culture and climate.

As a guest, and with the support of the public school teacher, I have the advantage of demanding a particular code of behaviour in my class, which is adhered to during the 'honeymoon' stage of the residency. Then it becomes lost in the next stage of the residency. I have a window of opportunity before this happens where I can introduce the healthiest challenges. I take the students through a rigorous warm up that introduces another kind of heat in the body – not the heat of peer-pressure-induced humiliation, not the heat of newfound sexuality, but the heat of simple physical exertion – a rare state of the body for many digitally driven teenagers. There are complaints, groans and haphazard resistance but when we decide to combine some of the exercises with music the performative aspect of their work is introduced and a silent engagement permeates the room. We then begin working in partners with the notion of counterbalance. This is a device for partnering where embodied fulcrum is the key component. The partners either push into each other or pull away creating an integrated standing structure whereby co-dependence is established. The fulcrum is established silently and it shifts almost subliminally as one student moves an elbow one centimetre to the right or shifts a foot closer to the other. There is a tentativeness in the room for many reasons; most importantly they are

touching. Whereas relationships are often established and maintained with derogatory, debasing banter, here they are not only *touching* but they are 'saving' their partners from falling. I teach the students how to fall before this counterpoint skill is learned. "What is the worst that can happen?" I ask, "if the fall is one metre down?" I realize that it is the existential notion of failing, not falling, that builds the fear. The investment of trust, the promise that can and often is broken, is paralleled in the teacher/student relationship where both parties are wary of the possibility of the shifting fulcrum, or even of accidentally letting go and falling. A test is stolen, a misplaced comment appears on a blog; this is the falling, similar to what Pineau calls the 'ideological body', in using drama to engage in literary interpretation, the participants bring the whole person – language, mind, body and culture – to the creation of the drama world. (cited in Medina, 2004, p. 146)

To continue the metaphor, I return to the ship and am always amazed and in awe of sailors who can lithely move about on a deck that seems to mischievously shift, forcing the centre of balance to be as fluid as the ocean below (hence the possibility of sea sickness). On the other hand, one of the saddest and most desperate images for me is of the rigging coming undone and the sheets left flapping aimlessly in the wind. This happens when a student recedes to a cool, vacuous detachment as opposed to maintaining the heat of engagement or even the fire of resistance; it is a moment when the anchoring of a relationship, even if it is just momentary, has been lost and the centre must be recovered.

I am currently at the stage with the students where time, in terms of both duration and frequency, has worked in my favour thanks to a generous grant from funding partners that recognize the importance of depth as a result of time. They have learned skills in embodiment. They have felt

the rigor of working for concentrated periods, managing the ebb and flow of their energy and avoiding what Barba (1995) would call “squandered” energy, and they continue to navigate the surges of intensity that come with a production. The sometimes-unpredictable winds change our course and remind us that all of this work is not necessarily about *The Twelfth Night* but rather what Medina (2004) refers to as the edges of the text, a place where we are encouraged to look beyond the literal confines of narrative to a re-imagined space of personal interpretation, a space where multi-modal explorations allow for a breadth and depth in understanding.

The time we have spent together resonates far beyond the stage and getting it *done* for opening night. We are setting precedents and are now charting our course for the inevitability of storms ahead. We are establishing the faith that weathering the turbulence is a choice worth taking. As Shakespeare wrote:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom.*

*If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*  
(Sonnet 116)

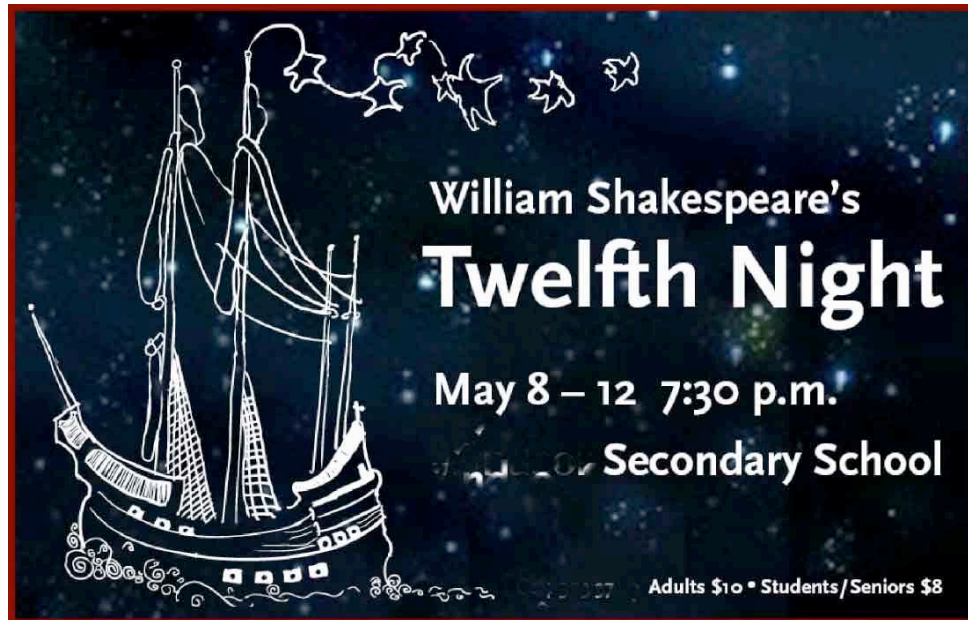


Figure 4. Poster from the play

***Program notes:** Just as the characters in this play had to survive the storm at sea, as well as the storms in their hearts, we have survived and learned from the stormy as well as the delightful days of this voyage together. There were both sunny rehearsals and rehearsals laden with cold wet wind, and we all learned to navigate our way with grace and openness. I have enjoyed every minute of this creative period knowing that I was in excellent company with both the students and teacher/director. This process was new for most in the production, demanding courage, diligence and humour; and just as a good sailor finds his way on a keeling, slippery deck, these students have found the balance to make this journey. The memories of this time together will resonate long after the dimming*

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*lights of the final scene. Thank you for this time!* (Ricketts, personal correspondence, 2007)

## **Summary**

*The Warm Countries We Are Lucky Enough To Teach In* and *Stormy Weather* are emblems of lived experiences and the surfacing of personal stories which are paramount in the creative process. This process is disruptive and often uncomfortable as the direction of our narratives can echo rhizomatic patterns without a linearity both in content and in the traditional governance of the context, i.e. director/actor. Appelbaum (1995) writes about this as an invitation to action,

There is a moment in which personal or cultural history stands before two diverging pathways. One leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established. It is safe, secure and stable. The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous. Unfettered by accepted categories of thought, it might be immediately hidden away from view, out of fear or repugnance. The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice stands on. (p. 16)

George Belliveau (2004), play builder and researcher, writes of similar challenges in his recount of a similar process:

The collective process brought out some doubts, and there were ups and downs in the group dynamics. The trials of writing a collective script were apparent. Some people felt that no voice guided the script and that it was all over the place, with too many ideas floating around. (p. 43)

Throughout the challenges of these processes I believe that authenticity and courage are the driving forces that keep nudging creative material into *the space*, and we are in fact the vessels that are both filled and emptied by this material, these personal stories. This state of filling and emptying calls me to look at this dynamic space of exchange often referred to as the third space (Irwin, 2004, p. 31) or the interstitial space. This borderless region is also reflected upon in Heidegger's analogy of the jug; the potter who shapes the jug does not only mould the clay but shapes the void, the emptiness, "The vessel's thingness does not live at all in the material of which it consists, but rather in the void that holds it." (Bhabha, 1995, p. 19)

In this way, I see the learning/creative space I work within to be an empty space, a void which is the result of a reductionary process of stripping away scepticism, stigmas, biases and fears, an open space of invitation to explore the unknown and remembered together. Bhabha (1998) speaks of the transitional space of such a void, Shakespeare of the removal of ground, Appelbaum (1995) of *The Stop*. In Barba's (1995) definition of this pre-expressed moment it is called **sets**, and the Japanese Noh master Azume (cited in Barba, 1995) speaks of this space as Ju Ha Kyu. Viktor Shklovsky writes about the technique that locates the interstitial space, the in-between temporality, as "the act of making strange" (cited in Heathcote, 1984). This is the dynamic space of stillness, the brimming of emptiness where conflicting spaces meet to form new meanings. These are but a few references to this phenomenon of space; this true void – out of balance, caught between one temporality and another – becomes a gathering place that stands in an oblique relation to itself and others. As a 'diagonal' event (Bhabha, 1998, p. 30) it is, at once, a meeting place of modes and meanings, and a site of the contentious struggles of perspective and interpretation.

When students experience the power, intensity and then the relief of presenting under lights for a captivated audience they are, of course, exhilarated – endorphins combined with wonderment – “how did that happen?”, “It went by so fast!”, but underneath there lingers a trembling, a resonance that in many cases has rarely seen ‘the light of day’. I spoke and they listened, and more importantly we spoke and we listened, unearthing voices that have been muffled over time for reasons too extensive to include here. In this process we begin to trust the body as an informant to parts of self that have been lost, buried or forgotten. This space of *embodied triggering* ultimately brings the power of the student’s meaning making process to the learning space and becomes a resuscitation of the inspired learner. Behnke (1990) writes about his as physical force patterns: “In particular, it will describe how tacit knowledge, of which learners are normally not aware, and which is triggered unconsciously by sensations of force patterns which can be accessed and exploited to improve learning.”

The ‘self’ begins to whisper in this process of surfacing stories. Within this process of creation and presentation the participants feel the shift from ‘I’ to ‘We’ as they witness the impact stories have on others. They experience the stirring that occurs in themselves when listening to their co-participants’ stories. It is in these moments of action and reflection that we combine theory and practice, dissolving the binary that often objectifies our participants, neuters the learning space and ostracises us from the heart of the work. Conquergood (2002) writes about this beautifully:

But de Certeau’s aphorism, “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across,” also points to transgressive travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract – “the

map”; the other one practical, embodied, and popular – “the story.” This promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research. Performance studies struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin of the binary opposition between theory and practice. (p.145)

Performing the work is not done as an authorization, nor as a validation of the process, but rather as a means of testing the power of the story. Can we cast these personal nuggets not only across the room in the rehearsal studio but across the chasm that divides the performer from the spectator? Can we use “heart” as our slingshot into the black space where we know 200 people passively ‘await’ for an ‘experience’? Yes we can as, I hope, has been shown in the teaching stories of these two residencies. The performances are ignited with meaning after the applause and whistles and hoots, after the lights go up and the performance experiences meet in a collision of accolades and humiliations. Or do they?

There are moments that, lived on the stage, will be deciphered by the students, either immediately or sometimes after a period of reflection. They are the invisible moments of stillness and silence when a performing space becomes charged with the voltage of personal meaning-making. This possibility, this availability, can transfer from the performing space to the witnessing space, and this is when the audience may whisper back “you are telling my story.”

## Notes



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