



PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE: MATTERS OF QUALITY IN COMMUNITY-BASED THEATRE

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Abstract: In this dialogic exploration of our shared experience of a community-based theatre project (CBT), we consider decisions, processes, and activities we selected to enhance the power of this arts-based research (ABR) form. We chose CBT as we believed it was the best approach to explore activists' experiences of the challenges of feminist coalition politics within and across equality-seeking organisations. Our dialogues surfaced some key aspects of community theatre-making which we believe

contribute to its quality, that is, its value and power to lead us to collaborate, listen deeply, tell stories, imagine a different world, and rehearse for action.

Keywords: community-based theatre; popular theatre; community engagement; feminism; feminist activism

We welcome this journal's reflective moment, celebrating its 10th year of publication. The call encouraged us to reconsider our past arts-based research (ABR) and community-based theatre (CBT) collaborations in order to articulate and share some key learnings that resonate in our work, and to consider what challenges are ongoing.

Our choice in using CBT to explore specific experiences in feminist coalition politics was carefully considered and deliberate. A central concern in writing this article has been to identify what decisions and activities enabled the growth of quality in our CBT collaboration. Because we were using an art form to address change, we wanted to unpack elements that truly unleashed the depths of expression and impact that theatre has the potential to provide. We want to explore elements and criteria that could be used to judge its quality, recognising that "quality" is a tricky word. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to consider. We have yet to find another term that best fits our concern with how context, process, and performance matter in achieving the full potential of CBT. In the following dialogue, we revisit both processes and performances, including the multiple choices we made as the project unfolded. We hope readers find our thoughts useful as they consider their own community-based research (CBR) and/or ABR practice.

Who Are We?

Shauna: I came to this project as an adult educator, with experience in community and the academy, and an orientation to lifelong learning and life-wide learning, with particular interest and involvement in women's learning. Feminism and social justice as well as creative expression are also important to me. It has been my experience that art-making supports imagination, and has the potential to create inclusive spaces where diverse voices enter the conversation and are heard. I had been an audience member at various community theatre events in the past, but this CBT project was the first time I had been involved with community theatre making.

Jan: I am a theatre director, teacher, and facilitator, focused on new creations, plays by women, and CBT, working in northern and southern Canada, and, for several years, in collaboration with artists in Kenya. Early in my career, I was able to fuse my social commitments and adult education-saturated upbringing with my love for theatre making, as I led *Catalyst Theatre*, then a social action-oriented company. With the help of remarkable colleagues, we explored and extended approaches to collaborative ownership in creation and performance,

partnerships with social organisations, interactive theatre forms, and theatre in community. I am still learning.

Quality Matters

ABR practitioners tend to shy away from discussing quality. It is a term too often used to dismiss creations emanating from activist-oriented community work, investigations by researchers committed to engaging deeply with community members who do not label themselves as “artists”, and those who believe that artistic expression can unearth stories and insights that other kinds of research may not. Dismissals through labels such as “untrained artists” tend to shut down important conversations, as both sides get their backs up. Such rejection, and the ensuing silences, are linked with professionalisation of the arts and the fact that in Western schooling systems, art-making has become optional, and in some cases, nonexistent. Art-making is commonly viewed as either fluff or only for the talented; creativity is not understood as part of being human, nor essential to children’s (and adults’) learning. As a result, artistic practice gets separated from its community roots. There is value in putting these challenges to the side for a moment, to have a robust conversation about quality. We believe that the qualities of a particular art form are, at least in part, why we choose it.

In community-based work, we use art processes because they take us—both community groups and facilitators—to new and richer places. They can link the intellectual with emotive engagement, theory with personal experiences, and information with story. They give priority to people’s experiences. It follows that we should continue to deepen our capacities and insights into the art forms that we use, consider their powers, and keep questioning and enriching our arts tool boxes. Some concepts are vital as we consider “what is quality”: context, choice, selection, reflection, adaptation, and clarity of purpose. We need to discuss the specific powers our art form(s) offer and how we might reach them.

The TDS Project: Context and Selection

Our major collaboration was entitled, *Transforming Dangerous Spaces* (TDS). We co-led this CBT project in Vancouver, Canada from 1998 to 2000, yet it continues to be a fertile source of inspiration, inquiry, and reflection. TDS was sparked by mutual interest in CBR, particularly community theatre making, and feminist activism/organising, specifically, the challenges of building solidarity across women’s differences. Would CBT create spaces for other activists to share and investigate their challenges within feminist coalition work? Could it help us find ways to move beyond some of the rifts and divisions among women activists?

The name of the project underlines our starting point. TDS grew out of our experiences in feminist activism; we saw this territory as dangerous because coalition and solidarity work seeks to transform oppressive structures and the status quo. It can also be a site of oppressive relations, and the risks of engagement are unequally shared. As Bernice Johnson Reagon (2024) noted, “most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing” (p. 401). We had both found ourselves in situations where we had reached the limits of our facilitation skills as conflicts emerged when women’s race, class, and gender differences collided. As White cis-gendered and middle-class women, we were part of the second wave of feminism—at least in North America—which reflected and had been dominated by the lived experiences of others like us. Women who were differently located in hierarchies of oppression in relation to their race, class, and sexual orientation felt (and were) excluded and silenced in these movements.

A central tenet of our project was not so much about making feminist activist and organising spaces safer, rather it was to respect that in any group there are risks and differences, even in groups that initially appear homogeneous. Our goal was to hear all participants’ stories, and then face and delve into them. Rather than making things safe, we aimed to explore ways to shed light on unequal risk taking. We hoped this approach could move toward making this risk more equally shared. Susan Bickford (1996) investigated various democratic theories, finding that little attention had been given to political listening. She advocated for forms of communicative engagement that made one more conversation possible. CBT, with its power to deepen listening and engage with conflict as fuel, seemed a potentially transformative art form with which to explore feminist coalition politics.

Another perspective we held as we started the project involved the oft repeated adage that feminist anti-oppression work is about giving voice to women’s stories. We believed that, in addition to that important element of social justice work, there is a responsibility for activists to create conditions for those stories to be heard fully. There are significant challenges, as Razack (1998) argued, to “listening across difference” (p. 49) which often leads to “passive listening to diverse voices” (p. 50). For Bickford (1996), political listening was not about developing empathy, rather, it was about fully attending to one another. We wanted to problematise the assumption that providing space to tell our stories equated to being heard, to move past storytelling as an end in itself, and engage it more fully as a powerful tool that is integral to action. Theatre is an art form where the possibilities of story telling and listening are particularly rich. It provides a structure that can reveal points of decision and potential for change.

We hired graduate students, who joined us as co-facilitators: Caroline White was in adult education, Shauna's field, and Sheila James was in theatre, Jan's field. Both came with solid facilitation and activist experience. We were successful in receiving funds¹ and recruited eight local feminist activists working in equity seeking organisations as co-inquirers, to explore their experiences of feminist organising. Altogether, we were a mix of White and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) women. We began in the early fall of 1998, and for the next three months we met weekly for several hours each Saturday morning at a local neighborhood house.

Shauna: I am not a theatre artist, so it was a steep learning curve for me. I was also worried about the time and energy this project would take. I was humbled to be involved, and happy that my adult educator orientation of "meeting people where they are at" was fundamental; as were moving furniture, bringing food, and preparing the coffee and tea.

During the early sessions we introduced various theatre exercises to help us move into our bodies, then started to emphasise activities aimed at surfacing stories of feminist organising and coalition work.

We note that we four project facilitators were also members of the broad definition of attendees: people engaged in feminist action in diverse locations. CBR comes in many versions, with a variety of relationships of facilitators and researchers within the participant group. It behooves us to name the relationships and include these insights in planning and communications.

Jan: As I arrived with more professional life spent in the arts sector than the university, I felt I was there as a community-based theatre facilitator. I was quite taken aback when, early on, several participants emphasised our university positions. This was one of many opportunities for adjustments of attitude that I experienced during this project.

Collaborative Planning

Between these weekly sessions, the facilitation team of four met to debrief the previous Saturday activities and plan for the next. This was a gift, somewhat rare in many community-based projects that are often constricted by time, money, and energy. There was opportunity to reflect on how we led, what we saw, what exercises did and did not do, and what messages we received during these theatre-based sessions. We had space to question and deepen methodologies and adapt theatre exercises, to open new territory each week. We had many moments during these weekly meetings when

our observations of the previous Saturday morning gathering became more nuanced as each of us brought different perceptions, thus enriching our reflections and planning. Over time, particularly as we learned how to work together, we experienced increasing benefits of such structured, in-depth reflections. These included insights into “where is the group at” as needs changed over time, “how are we doing as facilitators,” and “how might we transform core popular theatre practices to best serve this particular process.” As we considered our theatre and group processes, we continued to remind ourselves of the project goals, that is, to investigate working across difference and inequity.

As we worked, we extended our thoughts and approaches to checking in. It is integral and standard practice within CBT processes but, too often, check-ins and check-outs are seen as ends in themselves, a pro forma requirement. It was vital to find ways to hear more fully and to respond more robustly.

Jan: I remember the reflection sessions as quite emotional, feeling surprised and challenged at times by our blunt dissection of not only what we did (the exercises and sequences we chose) but also how we led (the nature of our leadership in the room). Many years later, I view these encounters as some of my most valued opportunities for learning how to be brave when working with theatre in community. I learned something significant from Shauna— how I could more fully embrace a “stay curious” stance, including working from a more open and flexible attitude, and watching more critically for assumptions that were no longer helpful.

Shauna: Jan taught me so much about theatre-making and community engagement. Many of the principles of community-theatre making I found transferable to my classroom teaching.

Engaging in Serious Play

We discussed risk and safety during initial workshop sessions, underlining how embodied theatre activities can surface varied and intense emotional responses. As facilitators, we noted that we were responsible for creating conditions for as much engagement as group members were comfortable with. We also encouraged them to take risks and be responsible for their own decisions regarding self-care and courage.

Some TDS members shared that they were hesitant and cautious to participate, needing to know who else was going to be there, given earlier interpersonal conflicts they had experienced in their work. They also made it clear that they wanted to play and

not get too serious or deep; they had joined to have fun, outside of the challenges of their work.

Jan: I was surprised and needed some convincing to really hear that this need for fun took precedence over the opportunity to dig into challenging questions in a new way. I felt we were both having fun *and* working hard, an ideal. But over time I have learned, too often the hard way, to listen better and respond by changing plans or slowing down.²

Shauna: I appreciated how participants were cautious about who would be in the room, given my own coalition experiences. I also appreciated the desire to step away from some of the challenges, to rest and recover. As Bernice Johnson Reagon (2024) noted, coalition work is hard, and activists need spaces to recover and refuel.

This link between safety and risk, play and hard work, was a recurring theme in our weekly debriefings where we explored how playful creativity was critical for social justice work, though often considered not legitimate in the serious work of activism. Theatre exercises provide opportunities to shift away from talking, to be playful and to act and react instinctively. It took a few weeks of engaging in these activities to loosen up, release some inhibitions, and feel more comfortable with what participants felt was “just play.” Following this, the group expressed desires to go deeper, to “get more serious.” At this time, we started to use the expression “safe enough to be dangerous,” which became a guiding principle in our selection and adaptation of activities.

As arts-based facilitators interested in change, we needed to check our assumptions and desires, pay active attention to group preference and needs, and be truly willing to abandon what we thought were project agreements as participants and co-inquirers stated and revised their needs. Sometimes it was important to take the long way round, and sometimes the new route took us into less charted territory and discoveries we did not anticipate.

Embodied Inquiry and Curiosity

Once people expressed comfort with the embodied activities, and the level of trust in the processes and in each other had grown, we decided on a more complex activity, hoping it would push us into a deeper exploration of coalition politics and the diversity of experiences we each brought to the project. At the next Saturday morning gathering, following a playful introduction to *Sculpturing*, a core popular theatre activity

where people use their body to create shapes. We divided into three groups with Jan guiding us through three interconnected moves.

First, in our small groups, we were invited to briefly discuss experiences of a dangerous space in feminist activism, and then, working simultaneously, to form a still and silent sculpture. Following this, we were to think of a more ideal circumstance and to form another silent sculpture. Finally, we were to move individually and silently in a way that reflected a journey of transformation each of us could take, from the first sculpture to the new, preferred shape. The journey was to be completed in 20 beats, which Jan marked off by clapping. The choice of 20 beats was to encourage full exploration of the journey between.

In one group's first sculpture, four women stood in a circle, each one taking a different shape, some looking inward while others looked away. In the second sculpture all four women had joined hands and were looking at each other. In the journey between, each woman moved in different ways, some remained in the same position while others travelled outward and then inward. In another group's transformation phase, one member walked out of the room as Jan clapped the beats, and did not join her group in a transformed shape. We were all moved by this exercise as we contemplated what it may take to get to that "ideal circumstance."

Jan: This is a powerful and common popular theatre exercise, as it builds embodied and imagistic responses and incorporates a focus on acts of change. I feel it was particularly effective because we chose to use it after the group had numerous other rich experiences in embodiment. Their responses were particularly creative and insightful, with remarkable levels of exploration. We shared a fascination with possible journeys between problematic schisms and more collaborative opportunities, without underestimating the challenges of getting there. In this exercise we embraced the momentary, brave, and dynamic steps required of us to reach changes we could imagine.

This creative work set us up for deeper discussions. We shared how the process of transforming had involved each group member on an individual unknown journey, at least not in our conscious thought. The excitement was palpable as these images and physicalised journeys opened up spaces to discuss vulnerability and the costs of enacting real change. Group members noted how this exercise involved both individual and collective engagement; they were honouring their own choices as well as responding to each other as they created group sculptures. Here was a powerful visual and physical enactment of Bickford's (1996) orientation to political listening as attending to the other.

This activity visualised the hard work of coalition and how it can unravel. The TDS member who had left the room shared that for her, the way to transform the space meant she needed to leave. In her journey towards change, she had listened to her body which told her she needed to take care of herself. We then had another lively discussion about how leaving groups and standing down from feminist engagements could be constructive and perhaps transformative. We talked about the importance of self-care and how the work is both demanding and sometimes debilitating. We explored how, as activists, we needed to understand how sustaining our engagements might involve distancing ourselves, finding ways for recovery, and how, in spaces of renewal, we can make better life-affirming decisions (Rosenbaum & Talmor, 2022).

Imagistic speaking without talking, physicalisation and metaphor, central aspects of theatre's power, can interrupt and deepen all the talking inherent in political organising. Embodiment demands and requires us to live in and listen to our bodies, and to pay attention to relationships in a new way. It builds courage. Telling the story is not the end point. Social justice work involves creating conditions for listening and acting in new ways, particularly the use of nondiscursive approaches to share experiences. In some ways, all this talk-talk-talk has gotten us into trouble, pouring cement instead of providing oxygen for growth. Transformation is a journey of making new meanings. Theatre-based activities are helpful as they are profoundly experiential and are useful when it is time to let go of the usual ways and get experimental.

Shauna: That particular Saturday remains vivid in my mind even after many years. It was a breath of fresh air, a radical change from my experience of competitive verbal exchanges, common in formal learning spaces where some participants are more familiar and comfortable, while others remain silent. In such interactions, there is little space or encouragement for active listening nor for attending to the other, both requirements for Bickford's political listening.

Playful Inquiry

The participants wanted to widen our circle. Through group members' networks, we received an invitation to attend a weekend gathering of a local organisation supporting women with HIV/AIDS, many of whom were sex workers. We were directed to do something that was playful and fun, as their meetings had been exploring difficult subjects and experiences. Some TDS co-inquirers joined, now co-leading this workshop. Though the theatre-making instinct suggested opportunities for a deep delve into HIV safety and censure issues, we leaned into the request for lightness.

We chose to not predetermine a specific final activity; we wanted to first join the gathering to get a sense of the group's level of energy. The room felt rather heavy, and the women seemed fatigued. It was also after lunch. Quickly, we decided to invite the women to use their bodies to make silent sculptures following the prompt of "great moments in a woman's life." The energy level grew and there was a sense of lightness in the room. There was much laughter. It was a reminder that play was an essential aspect of doing serious work, that laughter is a kind of oxygen that lifts spirits and provides fuel to carry on (see Butterwick & Selman, *Shaking the Belly*, 2009).

This was a moment when the principle of meeting people where they were at was central. We needed to stay flexible and responsive, to drop any previous agendas, aiming instead to engage in an activity that had depth and was joyful and fun, a process where they could tell stories and express other aspects of their lives, not just the difficulties they faced as women experiencing HIV.

As we extended our reach, we aimed to continue to let the form and content of the work grow out of knowledge of the context, rather than duplicating well-known CBT recipes. As theatre-based animators, the more range of options we have, the more truly responsive to specific contexts we can be. We can stay flexible, turn on a dime, and respond to people's needs in the moment.

Radical Adaptation and Vulnerability

After the fall series, six of the eight co-inquirers wanted to keep going. This commitment was a gift, as we could build on the foundations of the first period.

Shauna: I was delighted in the desire to keep working but, as I reviewed my teaching load for that term, I was also concerned with the time this work required.

With the group's interest in extending our work together, going deeper, and sticking with the process of rich reflection between each session, we aimed to discover more about the transformation aspect of our project title, "Transforming Dangerous Spaces." We knew it was important to delve into these insights, while not losing the playful disposition that could refresh and re-connect all of us on a weekly basis.

Jan: I recall a deep sense of not knowing as we contemplated planning this next phase. Each week I (re)learned to see that hazy stage as a necessary aspect of the planning, necessary as an artist and as a facilitator. This process did not follow a recipe, rather it was a journey where each dip and turn was a

moment to reaffirm, learn from others, (re)discover ways that theatre could respond to and extend group knowledge, and create what we later called *radical adaptations* of core popular theatre and drama exercises.

Because of the foundations of extensive playing and working together, this stage allowed us to tap the bravery in the room, to be dangerous. Facilitators also need courage, particularly when committed to collaboration, and particularly when one is both a facilitator and someone with personal stakes in the issues the group aims to address. So curiosity and bravery are required.

As artists and investigators, to deeply research the experiences of activists, we need to be alert to what we can learn in the moment. We need to dig into what people are thinking. If participants are silent, we may not be doing the work. To do so, we need to invest fully in the powers of our art, leaning into the essentials but also reinventing them in new ways—in essence, to listen or, as Bickford (1996) would say, give “attention to the other” (p. 2). Here was a time when the structure of theatre enabled a form of storytelling in which moments of change (possibly transformation) could be identified.

To respond is to redefine process at each reflection point and radically adapt core theatre exercises and sequences for that particular moment and context. Trotting out set forms may lead to good experiences, but may not take participants, nor ourselves, on the fullest possible journey. If we are too focused on standard methodology, we may well miss opportunities. If we hold on to assumptions of process or of intention, we may have a nice project, yet we may miss opportunities for generating deeper understandings of what is required for change to take place. We need to stay open to reframing and reconsidering our goals. Radical adaptation is part of our work.

At that stage in our CBT project, involving activities that encouraged the telling of stories, we came to wonder how to extend the power of theatre to examine our listening, particularly our silences. We thought this investigation into listening had become necessary and we adapted theatre processes to explore overt and covert audience responses, considering audience as listeners and watchers. We reflected that, in this process-oriented CBR project, sometimes we were audience members for one another. How did we “audience?” How and when did we listen? How did we witness? How did we participate? What meanings were being made? We wanted to build our levels of communication, or, as Merleau-Ponty outlined in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2010), create opportunities to consider yet another horizon of understanding and investigation. We wondered when and why we remained silent or chose to respond. Were we working actively on building coalition or holding back?

To dig into untapped aspects of this coalition research, we needed to (re)invent theatre process exercises. As the project continued, we revised core popular theatre activities to open up and explore our internal audiences, our silences, and our commitment to researching ourselves. We had noted moments when there had been tensions in the group, and silences which we had not explored. We decided that we would return to some of these moments (Butterwick & Selman, 2003a).

Each one of us was asked to reflect on our past sessions and write down something that they had heard another TDS member say or do that was triggering for them. These were written on small slips of paper, folded, and placed in a hat. The group formed a circle standing outside a long length of red silk that was laid on the floor. The group picked up the silk as Jan facilitated, and, building on the sculpture work we had done, she asked us stand ready to make a shape in response to what was read.

She randomly pulled out one of the papers and read: "What do I know about immigration?". We formed a full-group instant sculpture and kept that shape for a few seconds breathing into it. Then we slowly looked around the circle observing other members. Each shape was different, some portrayed a sense of fear or anger, others were showing a sense of joy or relief. Some had left the circle in various ways, so the shapes and each member's geographic location in the room spoke to us.

Shauna: As the statement was read, I froze. It was something I had said during a previous gathering when we were making a scene in which I was to take on the role of a newly arrived migrant. Nervous about stereotyping, I deferred, saying I had no experience of immigration. Well, this was not true, as my mother had immigrated to Canada in her early teens and faced many barriers. My comments had obviously triggered others. In response, I held the red silk across my mouth, my eyes wide open, expressing fear, surprise, and vulnerability. Expecting all other TDS members to be dismayed with me, I was again surprised, witnessing instead a wide diversity of responses, with some forming shapes expressing what appeared to be delight.

The wide range of instant responses to the statement speaks to the power of that adapted exercise. In using experiential exercises, we need to engage and shape a range of theatrical options to create imagistic containers, or structures, which allow people to express responses in open and courageous ways.

Jan: As a facilitator, this experience was scary and exhilarating. We knew we were inviting people to open up areas of division, dis-ease, or even anger within the group. We didn't know what would happen, only that there was an element of danger in asking everyone to expose things that they previously chose to let

go or suppress. We were inviting discomfort, at the very least, by asking ourselves to reveal the previously unsaid. We were opening territory that we did not know yet how to process, not to find a solution to this tension, but to make it available for inquiry.

Up to this point, we had built in two kinds of safeguards: processual and dramaturgical. We had continually addressed the importance and responsibility of self-care, naming embodiment's capacity to trigger in surprising ways. Taking responsibility for stepping out, decompressing, or asking for support was vital in the quest to create a space where we could delve into challenging issues in which all had stakes. We also created a dramaturgical container within which people were invited to express responses, in powerful yet structured ways. We all knew that all the contributions to the hat were from moments of challenge. We all knew that we would respond physically and simultaneously. And, via the red fabric, we depicted our ongoing chain of commitment to one another and the group.

This particular exercise, created and adapted for our specific conditions, led us to more deeply explore the significance of audience within the process stages of popular theatre work. Following this activity, we debriefed, and, over the next sessions, we further adapted the structure to explore in depth some of these shapes and other statements on the slips, while retaining the importance of exposing our responses as active audience group members.

This approach involved a radical adaptation of several exercises: *sculpturing*, *snap shot stories*, and activity-based improvised *mini-scenes*. In our case, a piece of cloth, tactile and concrete, was used to define and highlight audience members. The focus started with the *actors* playing out responses in mini scenes (4 lines), but then shifted to the *audience*, the rest of us, linked by this long piece of cloth, to silently respond and physically reveal our responses to the momentary exchange we witnessed. The audience then became the topic.

While *process* and *performance*, is a classic binary in CBT discussions, this exercise focused on the audience in the process. We conceived of our earlier silences as witness-based and saw these moments as points where the audience—ourselves—chose to remain silent. Thinking about coalition across difference, and the audiences we form and reform as we use CBT processes within groups, we see the silences among us as territory rife with possibility. The unsaid can be said, when it is safe enough to be dangerous.

Jan: While radical adaptation is crucial to unleashing the most potent and meaningful experiences, it's also important to keep in mind the spine of the

specific project, that is, its overarching goals, as well as the stage a participant group is at. And to check in with the group's agreements about moving forward. Adaptation of this kind is only possible, potent, and safe with wide knowledge of group desires and theatre's powers and possibilities. This one grew out of silences—my own, other facilitators', and the full group's.

In many ways, noting and learning from the reactions and ways of engaging participant audience members is about widening the territory and boundaries of community. Once again, we were reminded of the importance of staying open and curious, of how dynamic the learning can be when creating space and forms of engagement that enable untold stories to be heard.

Widening the Circle: Building Performance, Finding Form, Using Story, Naming Change

Nearing the end of this second phase, the group wanted to share their work further and expand our circle. We set out to create a community event.

Jan: I think that finding a performance form that reflects a group's process is vital. The performers must thrive. We wanted to offer a high-quality theatrical experience for the invited audience, and we got there by leaning into the processes and methods the group experienced and responded to.

Performance form should emerge from context (Butterwick & Selman, 2003b). Context includes the participant group make-up, their stories, their goals, areas of interest, and commitments. Letting these qualities guide us led to invention and, indeed, radical adaptation. We chose to not force ourselves to make a play but instead, to create what we eventually labeled a "Performative Workshop" for others involved in feminist action. Building on the work we had been doing on spoken and unspoken divisions within coalition work and the challenging nature of working across difference for change, we created a piece named *The Sweet and Sour Collective*. We saw this as a starting point for interactions with the wider circle about these issues.

The event was held at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Vancouver to which we invited other feminist activists working in various equity-seeking organisations. We started with engaging everyone in simple embodied exercises. We wanted our guests to experience the fun we had, the play, and how it opened up the group to engage with challenging territory in creative ways. Then we shifted to an interactive performance, to build our circle outwards, and to engage more widely in our questions, to not present fixed findings.

The fictional story grew from several members' experiences in feminist action groups. The scene was a planned improvisation, an approach we had used several times during our process work. Six TDS actors played characters attending a meeting of *The Sweet and Sour Collective*. They were quite varied, of different classes, cultural backgrounds, and ages, with varying agendas. In the scene, tensions arose between the White founding mother, played by Shauna, who felt her contributions were not respected, and other racialised members who wanted the organisation to move on to different issues relevant to them.

In some respects, this was a meeting of second and third wave feminism. Audience, including some TDS members, sat in a circle around and outside of the performance. We hoped this structure of theatre in the round would enable audience members to feel as though they were at the meeting too.

Once the conflict wound to a crisis point, the scene was frozen, then the audience was invited to stand behind and meet with a character with whom they felt the greatest affinity. In creating this form, we applied and adapted a principle of some interactive theatre, that audiences should be asked to advise characters who are like themselves. This kind of participatory theatre is about collectively identifying actions individuals can take beyond the theatrical bubble so this approach eschews 'othering'. In these groups, audience members had an opportunity to ask questions of their character, to gain a deeper understanding of their concerns, motivations, and emotions. Then they were invited to recommend differing approaches to their character, to offer something that could shift the tension productively or allow the group to name what was going on in order to move forward.

In these advisory sessions with the characters, suggestions were explored in depth, to ensure that any changes were not *magical*; adjustments had to be true to the character's history, concerns, and identity. It was a demanding process for TDS actors, who had to remain in role through these small group interactions. Other members of TDS, those not in the original playlet, paired up with the characters, to assist the group process. After collecting and exploring with their teams, the actors replayed the scene, using advice they had received. Following the replayed scene, an animated exchange about challenges and strategies for working across difference, building solidarity, recognising privilege, and so on ensued.

Shauna: This is another vivid memory for me. I can still feel it in my gut. In playing the White founding mother, I wondered if the wider audience thought I was playing myself, depicting my own history—which, to some extent, I was. I had certainly witnessed these kinds of exchanges in my coalition experiences

and had brought those memories to mind as we developed this scene. I struggled to stay in character while answering questions, feeling both in and out of my body, in character and outside. I was watching myself as I listened to questions, suggestions, and my responses. In the replayed scene, I followed one of my advisors' suggestions which was to not look at my watch and to lean forward as I listened to others. A simple but powerful shift. One of the many things I learned from Jan, and throughout this project, was the power of improvisation— how hard and yet transformative it can be to respond to, rather than block, an offer.

Jan: Watching the new scene was exciting. We could watch our character try to use our advice while other characters were also making new offers. While held together by the scene's meeting structure, this was *free fall improvisation*, as all the characters were bringing new behaviours to the encounter. We got to see our group's advice in action, to see whether and how it made a difference to the success of the meeting and the important work they wanted to do.

This work built out from several theatrical theories, including the importance of identification. As TDS member identities differed quite widely, we could create characters that would represent many of our intended audience. In studies of educational and theatrical impact, audience members report experiencing the most change when they also feel the most identification and empathy with characters (Selman & Heather, 2015). Audiences could draw on their lived experiences to inform and shape a new character, one who could try to transform a struggle. Using fiction that could be true in this way frees community actors to improvise and perform authentically, based on their experience, while also exploring and revealing challenging events that point to the need for change.

Keeping an orientation to workshop rather than performance of a show expressed where the group was at, and also, that we were about investigation rather than messaging. The piece was deliberately unfinished so that all of us—facilitators, co-investigators, and guest participants—could explore the questions it raised. The emphasis was on creating a container for potentially risky conversations to occur. Further, the focus was on collaboratively identifying potential actions rather than extracting story from the community.

Using theatre to create a space where audience members could identify and explore ways to move political and social action forward through conversation with a character rather than a person, allowed a freedom and space to speak bluntly without fear of backlash. Focusing their ideas on a character that intersected with their own identities offered opportunities to see, hear, and test ideas that could reflect on their own

positionality. This activity drew on everyone's imagination; the theatrical framework created a productive distancing from direct experience. It was an opportunity to try something new, and, as a result, come to a new place for further inquiry.

This spirit of inquiry and principle of representation can be embedded in performance, to deepen participation and reflection, and enact a commitment to widening the circle. In theatre, the audience receives story, event, and emotional content. There is great power and resonance seeing people who have lived a struggle standing up and being counted. Attention to exploiting the powers of the art form can move us farther than we imagined.

Returning to Quality Matters

How do we best exploit the powers of CBT? How do we make the fullest use of the art form by building those qualities into its processes and performances, into our research-based performances? Quality is an ongoing issue in the field; this can be annoying as it seems to impose a high art perspective on all arts-based practice, missing the point of much community-based work. Yet a project's quality, or qualities, will affect its meaning and impact. Quality of CBT includes the quality of both group process and its performances, both within the working group and when sharing work with others. In CBR and CBT, performance ideally flows from process and allows community-based actors to thrive and draw on their strengths of experience, knowledge of the issues, stories, and insights.

If we know in advance that there will be an external performance, we can shape the journey to include building the skills necessary to its success. If a group makes a decision to share their work later, the performance form can echo the process journey. It should grow out of the full group's deep consideration of who the audiences will be and what kinds of performance will allow them also to discover (rather than only receive our messages). It should be seen as a continuation of the inquiry, rather than potted messaging. And, to be most powerful, performance for change should build audience empathy, identification, distancing (permission to challenge), and be entertaining too.

If we were to offer one major message, it would be that CBT process decisions must be made more conscious through ongoing critical reflection. We believe that the key factors that enabled the quality of TDS were our frank weekly meetings, a commitment to checking our presumptions, and the questioning of stock plans. CBT practitioners are well served by documenting their reflections. Listening and hearing one another in these meetings and during our Saturday gatherings enabled us to tap into the powers of CBT and experiment with radical adaptation and vulnerability, a key element

of bravery. We had to steadily remind ourselves of the goals of the project and to put the participant group first, which sometimes meant we had to abandon our plans and replace them with others.

In Conclusion

A central concern of the TDS project was of listening across and into difference, to explore how, through CBT, stories of the challenges of feminist coalition politics could be told and heard. Deep listening enabled by theatre-based activities took us to new and richer understandings. Theatre allowed us to be braver than we knew we could be. At the heart of CBT and the activities we chose was a commitment to using and adapting activities that would deepen our inquiry, enable us to stay curious, and attend to the other, such that one more conversation was possible.

What does all this mean for arts-based researchers, arts-based facilitators, and arts-based theatre makers? We selected stories about different moments in the TDS project to highlight decisions we made that we believe led to a project of quality, one that tapped into the full power of CBT. Quality is dependent on process and the ways in which various theatre-based activities are chosen and carefully adapted. If the group wants to widen the circle through performance, its form and content should grow from these theatrically based investigations. As CBT facilitators, we should be working with groups to maximise expression, recognise courage, invent character, build collaboration with audience, and invite audiences to explore and discover (rather than being told what we think).

We were privileged to be involved in a CBT project where we could use the theatre, an art form which is powerful when its dramaturgy captures embedded action/conflict rather than messages. When CBT fully builds identification, pleasure, story-based action, and distancing, it is powerful. Theatre allowed us to be brave, to be seriously playful, and to be safe enough to be dangerous.

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ENDNOTES

1. University of British Columbia Hampton Fund.
2. See for example, Disele and Selman's (2022) *Canadian Theatre Review* article which explores questions of ethics within community arts-based work.