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READERS' THEATRE: WHAT IS IT? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Abstract:
Readers' Theatre is a simple, yet powerful, spoken word art form that can be transformative, informative, and celebratory. Storytelling is an ancient art form that serves purposes ranging from entertainment and education to cultural preservation and building connections. The Readers' Theatre model, outlined in this article, combines these approaches with a twist. In this case, readers *represent* the voices of the writers to protect the individuals' privacy. In other words, no one reads their own story. The article includes personal comments from people who shared a common bond: the Readers' Theatre experience. In addition to inspiring a message of change, Readers' Theatre can be used as a unique educational tool that fosters cultures of partnership and empathy. The message is not delivered top-down but instead comes from among those involved. Hearing the voices of those who have a shared experience creates a healing, enlightening environment for a community.

Keywords: Storytelling, Theatre, Transformative Narrative, Community

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Background

Readers' Theatre, as an art form, is not new. Poetry readings, play readings, and sharing our own stories - both personal and fictional - are all considered Readers'

Theatre. It is a simple, yet powerful, spoken word art form that can be transformative, informative, and celebratory. Storytelling is an ancient art form that serves purposes ranging from entertainment and education to cultural preservation and building connections.

The Readers' Theatre model, outlined in this article, combines those approaches with a twist. In this case, the readers *become* the voices of the writers to protect the individuals' privacy. It is comprised of true, personal stories submitted by members of an organization or institution who share a common bond, a lived experience. This model was developed by Mary Keepers, a theatre professional in the United States and a member of Creekside United Church of Christ (formerly Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ), in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1992 she received a request from church leadership to bring personal stories to life, *anonymously*, from members and allies of the LGBTQ+ community when the church was campaigning to become an Open and Affirming congregation, a designation of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and other denominations. Taking this courageous stand was a sensitive issue and a transformative time for the church. After the Readers' Theatre presentation, members of Mayflower Church (now Creekside UCC) voted overwhelmingly to become an Open and Affirming Congregation. Since then, the church has presented over a dozen Readers' Theatre performances on various topics during both critical and celebratory times in the history of the church.

Readers' Theatre topics are intended to enlighten, educate, start conversations, and bring about change. Presentations also enhance awareness of heartwarming, painful, sometimes controversial, subjects. The purpose is to give folks the opportunity to be heard, and provide a platform on which to share views, experiences, and opinions openly and honestly in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

Readers' Theatre Process

Discernment

In beginning the process, the organization or sponsoring group needs to ask these questions: What is the purpose (or focus) of the Readers' Theatre? Why are we doing this? Who is it for? What is the title of the presentation?

The 'Ask' or Invitation

Once decided, a simple, clear 'ask,' or invitation, is formulated. The following example of an 'ask' comes from Creekside UCC (formerly named Mayflower Congregational United Church of Christ) regarding changing the name of the church:

> We've come to an important milestone in the history of our beloved church ~ whether or not to change the name! So, we want *your* story...whether you've been here for a very short time or a lifetime...your honest, heartfelt, perhaps even comical, story that addresses the question ~ *What does the Mayflower name mean to you?* Once gathered, the stories will be edited for time and woven into a theatrical piece. Start composing your story today! Everyone has a story - I look forward to receiving yours.

The 'ask' is sent to all possible contributors. Depending on the subject matter, honoring anonymity is critical. Submissions need not be well-crafted pieces of writing, but do need to be honest and heartfelt, similar to a journal entry. Often the most frustrating moments can be the funniest or most outrageous; the most mundane can be the most profound. Gathering personal stories from various viewpoints is key! Set a deadline to receive stories, allowing at least three weeks for compiling and editing the stories and creating a script.

Gathering and Organizing the Stories: Creating the Script

Stories are submitted directly to a designated editor/curator/director who gathers them, edits them for length, creates an order, and weaves them into a 45- to 60-minute script. Think of it as a piece of art, like a puzzle or music composition; putting it all

together to create one beautiful work. The individual stories are woven together to make up the bigger story, giving it an arc—a beginning, middle and end—and bringing it to a powerful conclusion. During this process, it's important that the editor keep the audience, the listener, in mind. Sometimes a story reads well on paper but not as well aloud. Find the gem, the punch line, the center of each story. You want the message to be powerful and dramatic, while also finding humor. People need levity, especially when dealing with serious subjects such as addiction, abuse, injustice, or death and dying.

Mary Zimmerman, playwright and director of *Metamorphoses,* a brilliant play performed at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis in 2019, based on stories from mythology woven into a play, says it best:

> It's picking which stories, and in what order, that make a piece that has an emotional arc as a whole. Stepping very carefully and backing up and making sure if something should come next or not, is a big part of working the text that are more like a collection of short stories (Rostami, 2018, p. 18).

It is important to include as many stories as possible, to respect all who have made a submission. Everyone deserves to be heard! Presenting personal stories in this way is often cathartic for the writer and enlightening for the listener. Ideally, the piece represents a diverse range of ages, genders, races, backgrounds, and experiences.

The Readers/Actors

The script is read by four to six volunteer 'actors', preferably from within the organization and representative of the diverse voices of the writers. It's important that the readers are totally objective, have strong voices, and are able to 'tell the story'. They must be available to rehearse and willing to follow the script (not improvise or edit). Scripts should be in the hands of the readers at least two weeks in advance so they can familiarize themselves with the text and make adjustments as needed. In this format, no one reads their own story, to avoid conflict of interest and respect anonymity.

The Event

A performance date is set by the organizers well in advance to promote the presentation and let prospective audience members know. Rehearsals are scheduled, and the performance takes place!

Holding a Question & Answer or 'Talk Back' following the performance is valuable. The director, or the head of the organization, might lead off with a question or two for the audience to prompt feedback.

Feedback/Reflections Received

From Members of Creekside UCC after Various Readers' Theatre Presentations:

> What an amazing assembly of powerful stories - [presented] with humor, emotion, elegance, and professionalism. Today was astounding! We've already heard that some people made a stewardship decision based on the impact of today's readings.
>
> Sunday's performance was inspirational! I've come to really think through what is at stake and understand the 'other' side of the question. I am very excited the way our church is going. Our name will never die! I will accept the outcome willingly. We should choose a name that exemplifies leadership and strength.
>
> It required tricky tightrope walking, but I think it presented us with a true and fair representation of what our members wanted to say. And it has shown us where we need to turn our attention now.
>
> The Readers' Theatre piece today was just wonderful! I did indeed hear some things that made me think, "I never thought of it that way before."
>
> What a wonderful, life-affirming experience I had this morning [as a reader]. I think what we are doing is cutting edge...helping our beloved congregation to discuss death and dying is such an absolute gift.

From the University of Minnesota School of Nursing

In March of 2022, the University of Minnesota School of Nursing presented a Readers' Theatre titled *Healing Ourselves, Healing Others***.** The purpose was to bring people back together, in person, after being online during the pandemic. What were peoples' stories? How could we come together after this shared traumatic experience? Anonymous stories were gleaned from administrators, staff, and faculty. The audience was the school's faculty and staff. The presentation was very well received. These comments followed:

> So grateful for all of you! It was a meaningful day. I am optimistic about what is next!
>
> All I heard were rave reviews, even from the Dean!!
>
> Readers' Theatre is a transformational model and holds the potential of healing many of our polarizations today.

Summary

The Readers' Theatre model fosters cultures of partnership and empathy. The message is not delivered top-down but instead comes from *among us*. Hearing the voices of those who have a shared experience creates a healing, enlightening environment for a community.

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Mary Keepers is a retired theatre artist who has worked extensively as a singer, actor, director and theatre educator throughout the Midwest United States. As an actor/singer, her credits in the Twin Cities include Open Eye Figure Theatre, The Children's Theatre Company, Nautilus Music Theatre, Actor's Theatre of Minnesota, Illusion Theater, Ordway Center for The Performing Arts, and New Classic Theatre, and Skylight Music Theatre and Milwaukee Chamber Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, among others. Ms. Keepers was the founder and artistic director of The Mayflower Theatre Project, a south Minneapolis performing arts school, and the theatre director at Richfield High School for 12 seasons, where she directed and designed more than 35 productions. She has directed and/or taught for the Minnesota Fringe Festival, Stages Theater Company, Youth Performance Company, Steppingstone Theatre, Illusion Theatre, and The Children's Theatre Company. As a cabaret artist, Mary has performed at countless clubs, organizations, and venues including The Woman's Club, Crooners, Bryant-Lake Bowl Theater, and as a member of the Twin Cities Cabaret Artists Network. Since 1992, Ms. Keepers has curated, assembled, and directed more than 15 Readers' Theatre presentations. She holds a BA in Applied Voice and Theatre from Mount Mary University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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