

**Article No. 6**

**MEETING MYSELF FOR THE FIRST TIME WHILE ON STAGE: LEARNING THAT EMERGED WITHIN A COMMUNITY POPULAR THEATRE PROJECT**

**By Steve Noble (Canada)**

**Abstract**

Much popular theatre writing describes projects and the processes undertaken to achieve social actions. The group and issues drawn upon here comprised psychiatric survivors and their lives. The framing for the work relied on performative inquiry to develop popular theatre. This article focuses specifically on what cast members or 'co-searchers' realised as a result of a year-long journey. Notions of 'voice', 'identity' and 'power' were the larger key ideas that were shared. The article sums up these filtering concepts and places them in a diagram that shows how the cast, or 'co-searchers', created the relationships among themselves.

**Extrait**

La plupart des écrits sur le théâtre populaire décrivent des projets et les procédés entrepris pour atteindre des actions sociales. Le groupe et les problèmes traités incluaient des survivants psychiatriques et leurs vies. Le cadre du travail reposait sur une enquête performative pour développer le théâtre populaire. Cet article est centré spécifiquement sur les réalisations des acteurs ou 'co-chercheurs', le résultat d'un cheminement d'un an. Les notions de 'voix', 'identité' et 'pouvoir' étaient les idées centrales plus importantes qui étaient partagées. L'article résume ces concepts de filtrage et les place dans un diagramme qui indique comment les acteurs ou 'co-chercheurs' créèrent la relation entre eux.

**Resumen**

Mucha redacción popular de teatros describe los proyectos y los procesos emprendidos para lograr acciones sociales. El grupo y los temas se basan en los sobrevivientes psiquiátricos y sus vidas. El marco de trabajo dependía de la averiguación representativa para desarrollar el teatro popular. Este documento se centra específicamente en las vivencias realizadas por los participantes del reparto o los 'investigadores adjuntos' ejecutadas como resultado de un viaje que duró un año. Las nociones de 'voz', 'identidad' y 'potestad' eran las mayores ideas clave que se compartieron. El documento resume estos interesantes conceptos y los coloca sobre un diagrama que muestra cómo el reparto o 'investigadores adjuntos' crearon la relación entre ellos.

**Author's biography**

Steven Noble is a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. He was born of bi-ethnic parents (Irish-Canadian/Jamaican) and so has bicultural heritage that informs his life and work. He was raised on a farm for 15 years, so has a deep respect for rural living. Half his life was spent living in various cities, and more recently in various rural areas — he much prefers the latter. He is someone who is gay and lives with his partner of eight years. From his earliest years, he has been involved in one social justice issue or other.

# MEETING MYSELF FOR THE FIRST TIME WHILE ON STAGE: LEARNING THAT EMERGED WITHIN A COMMUNITY POPULAR THEATRE PROJECT

## Introduction

By way of beginning, the context within which this study took place was a small town on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada (population 4500). The group that participated comprised members of a local mental health day-care program, based upon the 'clubhouse' model begun in the United States. Fourteen psychiatric survivors, along with two social workers, two counselling students and two theatre people, spent nine months between 2002 and 2003 developing a theatre performance based upon the lives within the cast collectively. The focus was upon these disempowered individuals 'reading' their experiences of the mainstream interacting with them. To help open up potential episodes of interaction, the methodology of performative inquiry (Fels 1998) was used. Within this research approach, participants replayed situations that illuminated 'differences' in power, identity, social location and voice. As these scenes were reimagined, deeper questions of 'what if?' and 'so what?' were explored. Gradually a kaleidoscope of meanings emerged from among the players' physicality within interactions. This awareness slowly created what became the play, *Shaken: Not Disturbed ... with a Twist!*

In order to develop the performance from earlier inquiries, the process of popular theatre was merged with the forms and structures found within the Theatre of the Absurd. Popular theatre relied upon disempowered people to speak from their experiences (Prentki and Selman 2000) to connect with those similarly disadvantaged for the purposes of raising awareness and Freirian (1997, 1993) conscientisation. The goal was further social action. The structures and forms of absurdity were incorporated within the performance and interpretations of 'the body' and bodily functions, 'black' humour, parody and contradiction between dramatic action and effect.

Finding one's voice leads to the uncovering and (re)discovery of identity and the unfolding of personal power to act. This relationship was uncovered through the performative inquiry carried out by a cast as 'co-searchers'. The rest of this article discusses the shifts and increased awareness realised by cast members through this experience. Initially, the discussion deals with how the effects of increased sense of voice were experienced within theatre, followed by an examination of how this informed changes in participants' sense of identity, enabling them to experience a greater sense of autonomy and collective power — or conscientisation.

## Comprehending voice

The embodied act of voice, through performance, resonates with Butler (1997) and Phelan (1993) in that every time a person speaks or acts within life, they are in the midst of recreating and marking their identity. There is strong effect upon spectators when authentic experience and story are shared theatrically.

Group members increased their understanding with regard to their voices. During the performative inquiry that led to various scenes — particularly the episodes that were highly personal and individualistic — cast members realised that their experiences held importance and relevance. As they relayed lived experiences to each other, similarities and differences became discussion points.

Salverson (1997) reminds popular theatre practitioners that overly exposing a person's story can create vulnerability because, once aspects of self are released, there is no complete returning to anonymity or confidentiality. There is merit in such a position; however, for those who are familiar with the invisibility the 'closet' represents, hiding can be an act of protection, but it can also be a force of entrapment — of further silencing. Within the play, there were three scenes that were uniquely and determinedly personal. Keeping Salverson in mind, I began, when working with Amelia and Tallulah [all participant names are pseudonyms], to suggest that the scenes (Bedtime Story, Family Gathering, Blind Leading the Blind) needed to be revised to protect their privacy, and therefore their identities and lives, from public scrutiny. Their responses were quick and definitive. They had to remain as they were because they were powerful stories that *needed* to be told. Tallulah went further, reminding me that if I could trust and have faith in her and she in me, then that would be the basis for her believing in herself and what she had to say. Encouraging each cast member to speak up individually allowed the story's power to become vocally effective within the community.

There is a level of self-deprecation and self-silencing that occurs among consumers of mental health services — people have a perception that they are somehow worthless. Speaking before the larger community, they discovered that their sense of self and their personhood had much worth. Jean, one of the counsellors, suggested that her role as part of the cast and its function to give voice to marginalised stories was one of conduit — to enable the cast's experiences to be vocalised and told through their embodiment of their presence. Cary reminded us that the cast spoke and dreamt from inside creases of society. By their very nature, these folds are dark and hidden and these boundaries become extended into other spheres of living and life.

The power of voice is different from the voice of power, as Bette hinted in discussions. To speak out is a dangerous practice. The voices of power, as exercised through professionals, wanted to shield cast

members from repercussions, most notably obtaining employment. Psychiatrists of cast members wanted to know why there was a need to do this play. Why did performers have to speak out? The effect was one of silencing by one in power. This is hinted at when a question in the mind of Bette went unasked — an echo of being invisible and unheard. Just because there are those in society who have knowledge and education, this does not necessarily mean they have the ability to understand or have awareness with regard to those they serve. There can be a presumption of knowing that only speaks of ignorance.

Through the embodied act of speaking — physically, emotionally, vocally, spatially, interactively — all repeated acts help in the performative construction of identity (Butler 1997). Through several experiences of participants, there was growing understanding that moments of recognition 'fall out' of relationships, implicating each person's participation in raising awareness. Within the play's creation and performance processes, and the cast of co-searchers, emerged a greater sense of self.

### **Acceptance of identity**

Psychiatric diagnosis was accepted by each group member as *part* of what made up identity, not its defining aspect. Within the ongoing working of the group, individuals developed their own sense of self. As Joan suggested in a personal letter: 'We developed a family.' The period of talking sessions was like a big family meeting where individuals brought out various issues and stories, placed them in the middle of the group for playing with, looking at from many angles, to help one another while developing material to explore for the play. Within the safety of the group, which the cast constructed for itself, cast members made the observation that ordinary people 'acted' as part of their living, and so society demonstrates that part of living is acting — that there is a space, a distance that is maintained between individuals and living so they can manoeuvre during difficult situations. Through 'aimless playing' and developing characters, 'acting made me figure out who I was'. To find a sense of self, each cast member worked in the characterised bodies of others: psychiatrists, social workers, other clients, family members, nurses and so on. It is through the eyes of their Other that participants met themselves. Once they faced who they were, embodied actions allowed each to work upon themselves, play from within, to see out and develop further. Through the development of self-image eventually came self-worth and self-pride. Being proud came through the chant in the play with the phrase that the cast played with to make their own:

*Go mental ... Go mental ... Go mental ... Go mental ...* [chant in play]

Related to family, the idea that the cast became a group of friends was powerful. Katherine suggested: 'The cast was performing with one another, not at one another.' The support was there for people to stand out before the audience and speak, knowing the cast was standing there behind each person. Family members, friends, students and mental health workers comprised most of the 350+ audience. As a result, friends and loved ones coming to hear their voices speak out saw the experience as an inspiring one. For some among the cast, this public presentation was their first time in any public spotlight. For others, many years had passed since the last time. For all, the popular theatre process was empowering. To hear the support of loved ones was humbling to some. Simply enjoying the gifts that cast members brought in the packaging of themselves was amazing for spectators to take in. Cast members enjoyed the laughter and being able to just play and learn through those moments without it feeling like therapy all the time. To the very end, the attention of each cast member was toward the group and one another.

Some in the cast, like Jimmi, were seeking a role to fit within the larger community, and many have acted on this desire since the project ended. Getting affirmation and acknowledgment from peers, professionals and strangers was very important: they understood that their stories mattered and that, through their tales, their lives were valued. Community recognition and payback legitimated their identity for them. This highlighted just how much we, in society, put stock in others' views of ourselves as we play a role in terms of responses to and from others. This shift in identity plays out in very subtle, yet marked, ways in both the cast living with mental disorders, but also among counsellors.

As more and more stories were told and experiences shared across the various mental diagnoses within the group, personal histories and identities became increasingly normalised — to the point where aspects of pride emerged within the process and became slowly included in aspects of self. The ability to present one's face and abilities out to the community also provides an avenue for creating a public face and entry back into the local community. Extending risk and trust was important to the group because members saw that I was not judging, but encouraging and having fun, and taking my time; since I took risks and trusted the group, the members, in turn, could venture out a little and take risks and trust more. Like many clients in the mental health system, many aspects of their lives are controlled and dictated and watched by various people: family, employers, medical profession, social workers, and so on, so that their need to develop self-confidence is largely under the control of others.

Jean mentioned that the experience of the show and the immediate positive and supportive response from the audience renewed the cast members with a heightened sense of 'life force'. There was a greater connection with/in the world. I ran into Amelia the morning after the performance at Open Door, and she was humming as she was preparing Sunday brunch for the members. She was a smile personified as she said: 'Last night was so awesome. I'm just skipping on cloud nine.' (Field notes: 102). Jean indicated that the embodiment of new energy was taken in deeply and became a part of her persona. Further, Jean said that the experience affected her own sense of self through the reactions of professional colleagues within

Mental Health Services — through 'getting affirmation and the feedback and recognition and the acknowledgement from peers, from other professionals you know' (Jean, interview 14: 20). While the focus of this study was about voice, identity and power shifts among the performing adult learners, the power through voice affected those who witnessed the play. Some local authority figures found themselves perplexed or vexed when faced with voices that have long been historically silenced (Porter 1987, 2002) clashing with their own contradictory authoritative psychiatric constructions of mental health condition.

With regard to Bette and her voice about mental disorder, she believed that to talk about it was a way to change perceptions of mental diversity and to change the meaning of her own history, as well as the way others viewed her directly; together, these shifts changed herself and her identity. The freedom experienced within theatre allowed cast members to explore their sense of self. Tallulah expressed this powerfully when she described meeting herself in the 'fiction' of the stage, and she considered the ways in which others received her explorations to be important. Tallulah seemed to gauge my reactions to her explorations as an influential onlooker. As she played, I followed. In playing with the cast, Tallulah saw this not as judging, but simply as being in the moment. From the make-believe emerged a sense of the real.

In believing in what Tallulah had to offer, in whatever means she felt appropriate, we were there with her. The group of co-searchers never remarked nor reacted in a way that indicated disbelief — rather, it was 'show us more'. And this went through the group from one person to another. In a sense, this had an 'anarchic' feel to it. By anarchy I don't mean chaos, or the group addressing the unilateral dictates of a stand-alone leader, but rather each member looking after the needs of other members without judgment, knowing that all members were doing the same for one another.

Cary's view was that he became creative again, and that he had accomplished something. He also hinted at the barriers that many in the cast faced when becoming involved with the project: the powerful effect of medication — really, the side-effects. Despite the hurdles, he accomplished something and it was in the completion of the project that he found a level of autonomy. For many within the cast, the ability to commit and complete the work added to their sense of capability and functioning. The combination of finding voice and re/constructing identity was a source of power — a (re)emerging sense of autonomy. It is to this third aspect that the discussion now turns.

### **Power to influence**

Of the three aspects of the work being examined, the area of personal power was something that played itself out in fluid and dynamic ways. Much of the struggle of 'power over' was among the counsellors in the cast; however, the clients were exploring outward through an emerging sense of autonomy or 'power to do'. The ability to present experiences created the capability to influence audience members. The collective power of the cast was in reaching out with stories to which others in the community — often isolated — felt connected. Working from within a group provided a sense of protection in that each was within something larger than one's self, yet they could contribute a voice within the broader group identity. The cast's presence served as a middle ground for individuals to grow accustomed to asserting themselves intentionally and publicly. There was power in finding one's own effectiveness through the workings of a broader project. Through this legitimating relationship, the cast exercised influence in different ways.

Power also played out through tensions. While the cast members who were psychiatric survivors were fine with whatever occurred, the embedded counsellors within the group were not. One counsellor strongly mentioned that she would 'be more comfortable with rehearsals that have a clear purpose and motivation and with more of the lines memorised' (Katherine, Interview 8: 7). She remained the one person who continued to demand that order, control and familiarity should occur from beginning to end. There was less faith that the cast could work through ambiguity in their own way until the time to perform arrived: a path that included much chaos. Interestingly, when Katherine took on the activity of timing scenes and transitions, she became 'in her element' of measurement and having control. Time measurement was concrete and known for her; at the end of each rehearsal, she reported various times and deviations from previous rehearsals — she was tracking our progress with regard to the production's run time. This was the same person who had a strong response to the trust exercises involving the group. Was there a connection between her demand for order and predictability involving the group and her reaction against trust? Was her experience a transgressive 'moment of recognition'? For others among the group's counsellors, the tug of wanting to take control was very strong, but eventually they trusted the chaos of the process. Katherine was puzzled when, like a light switch, it all fell into place. The same thing occurred at the fringe festival — utter chaos when we arrived at the performance venue for our technical rehearsal, but the shows were sharply focused and orderly. The technical manager privately told me later that he was afraid while watching the technical rehearsal that the show was going to be a disaster, and marvelled at how from such ambiguity emerged an ordered and articulate show that was emotionally powerful.

There was a need, occasionally, to guide the cast through teaching of various theatre games and exercises, the tools for later exploration, rather than experiencing unlimited space and freedom to explore and wander. Being less controlling enabled deeper ideas and experiences to bubble out. Had I been directive throughout, there would have been early foreclosures of pathways and a taking away of power from the cast members in their searches. In standing back and encouraging meandering, counsellors (and I) discovered the flexibility of my role. Rather than being a 'teacher' and 'students', we were frontier co-searchers playing in hinterlands of embodied experience.

Cast members began to take risks. One person, Cary, felt uncomfortable dancing and initially did not want to participate, but wound up in all three of the performance's dance pieces because he decided he wanted to try. Bette, Buster, Joan and Amelia, when they initially felt they had nothing to say or couldn't be creative, contributed their poetry. They did have lots to offer and the poems were very powerful statements of their lives. Some took on roles that were uncomfortable at the beginning, but worked through their feelings and found some understanding within the different characters and performed them with great sensitivity and virtuosity.

One of the biggest lessons learned from within the client cast was that they could commit to something over a long period of time and complete it. One of the challenging aspects of mental disorders is that attention spans tend to be quite short and energy levels tend to ebb and flow, so to stick to something and finish it was the biggest achievement and lesson they learned. That was one of the biggest 'aha' moments felt among all the cast. The realisation that the group stuck with something for many months was one of the greatest achievements felt by many. To begin with nothing, through to the creation of a two-hour production, was an important lesson that many took away with them.

They all felt confident and successful in finding an empty space, making it their own while creating something unique. Through commitment to this project, they discovered there was power in seeing something through, despite a few bumps and the aura of uncertainty. They found there was power in perseverance. Equally, there was power of confidence in accomplishing something, particularly something creative. For some in the cast, it had been years since they had taken on anything large or creative and completed it — seen something produced through their efforts, collective efforts. Working as a group was in itself quite empowering; no longer did each have to feel alone; through their joint efforts, they forged strong relationships and friendships — cooperative power, group power.

The process of popular theatre created was a respectful one, as indicated by one of the counsellors, Lauren. She found this striking because it was something that she felt did not often happen for her. Also, as a student counsellor, Lauren had come from a very dysfunctional and traumatic past where she often was placed in destructive and powerless situations. Within much popular theatre, power is diffuse and spins off in multiple directions, where each participant has power. Yet, for Lauren (and Katherine), even the safety of our constructed place remained a risky place because of power's presence and the sharing of it. In profound ways, the cast guided and helped Lauren to express her individual powers and influence within the group while opening up her personal cycle of passivity.

Buster described an audience member who found the play cathartic, yet he did not. Why could it not be so for Buster? Perhaps he could not because of the emotionally deadening effects of the psychotropic drugs (the ability to express emotions was something of interest to Buster because he did not know how to work with the 'in between' emotions — like suspicion, contentment and shame — that fell outside of obvious feelings like happy, sad and angry); however, he did understand the power that the group exerted in reaching the woman he spoke with from the audience. And yet, Buster was aware that he made choices — particularly as they related to the theatre group.

Joan initially spoke of not always agreeing with the production, yet described a scene in her own life that was drawn in parallel from the lives of other cast members in the play. To get to a place that was divergent from scenes in the play, she did have to negotiate in similar ways to get what she needed from the system.

For many in the cast, a major step was taken in that a longer-term project was entered into and completed a year later. Committing to something outside of their normal lives was a struggle for many, but the sense of accomplishment felt by all in the group was overwhelming. From some of the emotional work we had done in the earlier part of the process, Amelia discovered that she could manage some of the negative aspects within her life, and for Tallulah this had to do with pleasing others and in the process losing who she was. This changed for both Amelia and Tallulah as a result of their experience in 'acting'.

After the experience of the performative inquiry and theatre-making process had wrapped up, there was evidence that learning migrated out of our circle into the broader lives of players. The most immediate had to do with making life choices for oneself rather than to please others and be silenced and put down. The first story here dealt with the value of friendship, but most importantly with one's sense of self-worth. While the story is complete and lengthy here, Amelia having read a copy of this report, believed that this was an important piece to include — to continue teaching people through reading her story.

Tallulah also mentioned a story that involved a time when she first moved to Victoria to live with her boyfriend. She had started a job at a beer and wine store but soon quit. As she was serving customers, she noticed that several mental health clients were coming in to purchase alcohol. She is an avid non-smoker and a non-drinker, so had no idea of the extent to which she would be around both. Nor did she realise that she would recognise others living with mental disorders coming in to purchase alcohol to self-medicate — a sure road to self-destruction (a road Tallulah herself had been on years before). Not wanting to be involved in others' desire for self-destruction, Tallulah quit that job. On its face, this may seem a small incident; however, Tallulah had lost most of the jobs she had held either because of employers laying her off or because she became bored. This decision to quit based on moral feelings placed it within her control through reasons she felt she could justify. Tallulah relayed that she had been through many relationships and jobs, always being fired or laid off from them. Rather than be implicated within others' self-medication and personal destructions, she had opted to quit. This was a pivotal point in her life regarding the issues of

employment: she made a decision that was beyond her own life and was more about others' welfare. Among cast members, various discussions we explored had involved creating more awareness around oppression and power issues. Tallulah has since moved on to other employment that involves the care, rather than the destruction, of others and helping. She was moving into areas that were not as familiar to her and, as she stated after the project: 'If you stay with the known, I don't think you learn.' (Amelia, Interview 6: 43)

Despite my suggesting that the project be done with them in mind, group members had suggested that it was about reciprocity or giving back. I had helped them through the theatre process and production, and they wanted to help me through the interviews and wanted me to let them know when I was to present the paper that forms the basis of this article so they could be there to cheer me on. In the end, it wasn't about any one person but it was about all of us getting what we needed from the work together. They knew my purpose (my dissertation), and so they understood that the importance of the work was something that extended beyond them personally.

### **Putting the pieces together**

Among the cast, we had a last-minute inclusion of a client, Jimmi. His responsibility was helping with the scene transitions through playing his signature discordant/disharmonic music, which meant he had to watch for the beginnings and endings of scenes. This was going to be a challenge because his mental disorder had reduced his attention span to extremely short periods. But what he wanted to do above all was play music. Throughout the show, he was right on cue; however, because his love of music was so strong, sometimes he wasn't watching for his cue to stop!

It was from Jimmi that the impetus for putting the various pieces of identity, voice and power came together. Months after the show, he was talking to the cast about a particular incident in his life. A mental health professional — presumably an expert in mental functioning — had alluded to his view that Jimmi would never marry because he was not normal. That devastated Jimmi, and he has carried it with him in his life ever since. It was his rhetorical question that sparked the fusion of the pieces. A person in authority had understood the abstractions of mental health, but had not considered the feelings, dreams, aspirations — the humanity — of the person bound up within mental impairment. It didn't matter that he may have had a sexual life, a romantic life — that there was a possibility for something more.

The inner triangle in Figure 1 underscores how the outside pieces go together. To have voice and power alone suggests that there is an imposition of will and perception on to others, creating and perpetuating ignorance. To have voice and identity without personal power, means empowerment cannot be realised — only oppression. Power and identity alone, without the inclusion of voice, result in arrogance. Rather, both are likely to be constructed through powerful others and their abilities of erasure, as has been the instance with this group of individuals living with mental disorder. Medical professionals, social workers, family members and friends all impose themselves on to the psyche of a person living with mental disorder, creating invisibility of all kinds, rendering that individual powerless. The authority is assumed to necessarily reside within those who presume to know — not in those who do know their own lives most intimately. To have identity and power alone does not generate reciprocity. However, having voice is not limited to the act of speaking, but also includes the performative act, the interactional and interrelational. Voice is critical for communicating in order to perform reciprocity, to show that one has received and that one can give in return.

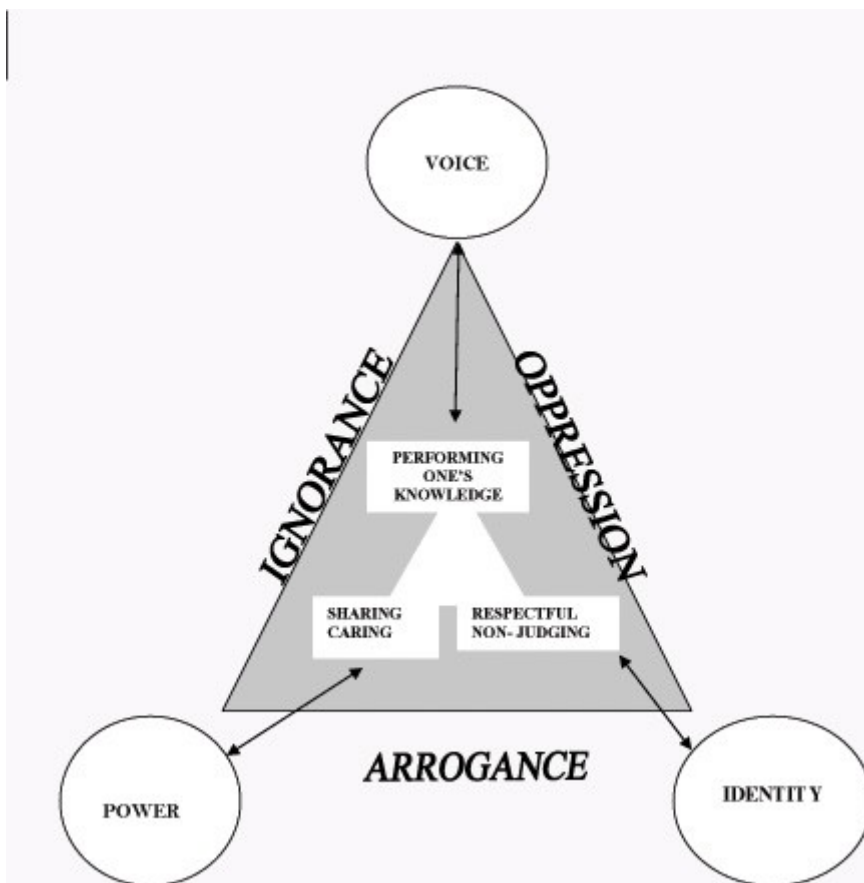


Figure 1: Conceptualising the meaning of popular theatre/performative inquiry in the lives of adults living with mental disorder

The inner triangle gives a clue as to how these failures of misunderstanding, non-reciprocity and disempowerment can be overcome. Through what was revealed in the experience of this group, we see three key elements that are required to achieve acts of knowledge across difference: sharing/caring; being respectful/non-judgmental; and the space to perform one's knowledge, both to understand another and for understanding oneself.

### Summary

This paper draws extensively upon the words and experiences of cast members as they reflectively talked through interviews following the theatre. The lessons and insights into their own personhood came through with learning being significant on a number of levels. Jimmi learned he could take in a lot of information and experiences in one sitting, and could contribute to a large project through his improvisational ability to link pieces together into a whole. Tallulah, Amelia, Jimmi, Cary, Buster and Joan all learned that they could commit to a long and very involved project — and saw it through to the end. This alone is a large success. Amelia has learned how to use acting to help with her day-to-day life, as has Tallulah. All have mentioned that they know that they can be creative and that their efforts have value in the larger community.

And the counsellors gained insight as well. The need for control and familiarity was a struggle for some, but they grew to understand why the process was necessarily chaotic and ambiguous. A high degree of flexibility is needed for working with many people in a creative venture where multiple voices all want to be heard in their own unique ways. Non-clients also were witness to the dramatic growth and change in the cast members who were clients — and were witness to the stories of complexity and emotion that were relayed so honestly and straightforwardly by the cast. As a result, the differences among all the cast members gradually melted away until only people remained — individuals who had come together to create and perform stories.

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