

“Hooray for You and Me”

The Story of a Theatre Group

Aynsley Moorhouse

This piece is adapted from a weekly online blog that I kept while working with a group of residents at a long-term care home. Here, we watch a group of nine older adults transform from strangers and acquaintances into an active and vibrant theatre company. We see the group members learn theatre techniques, build strong and lasting connections, support each other in their creative expressions, and work together for a common goal: to develop and ultimately perform a piece of theatre. This blog chronicles the theatre company from its first rehearsal to its final performance for approximately 200 audience members at Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto. It showcases the power of theatre to bring great individual joy and growth, to build strong relationships and communities, and to create – even in small ways – social change.

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ONE WEEK TO GO

20 March 2012

I’m Aynsley Moorhouse, and next week I will be launching a theatre and digital storytelling program for residents of the Apotex Nursing Home at Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto, Canada. Baycrest is an “academic health sciences centre” providing care for “older adults across a variety of institutional and community-based settings.” In their Mission, the organization states that they are “devoted to improving the quality of life of older adults everywhere through the integration and application of exceptional healthcare, wellness promotion, research, and educational activities” (Mission, Vision and Values). I am working closely with two Recreation Therapists and the Department of Culture, Arts and Innovation, and I am very thankful for this support.

My training and background is in theatre; I have an MFA in Acting from The New School in New York City, and an MA in Theatre Studies from the University of Toronto. My passion is for working with older adults and people who live with dementia. Over the last eight years I have worked as an actor, dramaturge, writer, and teaching artist with people of all ages and with varying levels of physical and cognitive abilities.

Next Wednesday, after months of programming, scheduling, researching, and recruiting residents and staff, the theatre group will hold our first rehearsal. We'll be working toward developing a devised piece¹ of theatre to be performed for staff and family members at Baycrest. The piece will be created collaboratively during our weekly rehearsals and in one-on-one meetings and will be constructed entirely from the participants' words, ideas, and stories. We're incorporating digital storytelling into the project: I'm going to be meeting with residents individually to make several short films about their lives. As yet, I only have a rough idea of what shape this project will take – that will depend on the interests, goals, strengths, and stories of the participants in the group.

AND WE'RE OFF!

28 March 2012

Today was the official launch of the Apotex Theatre Group. I've already learned a lot! Knowing that the first day of any group project can be a bit scary and daunting for everyone (myself included), I thought it would be helpful to begin with a long introduction. I was so wrong.

My main mistake was overestimating how much I would need to ... well ... talk. I could have gone on for the whole hour (and I think I half intended to) about how excited I am about this project, about all the possibilities and my many plans, about the impact we can have, and about my training, but the people came to the group to *do* – not to sit around listening to me jabber ... about myself. So I stumbled over my words for a few minutes too many before looking up to uninterested stares. I put down my notes, got up on my feet, and shut up.

We began by discussing possible themes and topics that we could explore over the next several months. Family, loss, war, friendship, community, aging, and life in the Apotex are all themes that were brought up by the group, mostly highlighted by personal anecdotes.

1 | See Gray et al. in this volume, p. 111, for explanation of “devising.”

I discovered that we have a poet in the group, or rather, according to him, a former poet. His name is Barry.²

"I used to be a poet," Barry said, to which I replied, "I would love if you might try writing again, for our play." He sat for a moment without saying anything, but then, just as I was about to gently change the subject, he said quietly, "Yes. Yes, I would like that."

I should add that this is the same gentleman who, at the end of the session said to me, "I am starting to get a glimmer of interest in this project. Just a glimmer. See you next week." This left me feeling hopeful ... I think.

We also discussed what we are each hoping to gain from our time together. One woman, Fiona, said simply, "I'm here to learn how to act." Tom said, "I was a lawyer my whole life, and now I want to use my performing skills in the theatre." A woman who expressed feeling isolated said, "I would like to expand my community and get to know some of my neighbours better." Near the end of this discussion, Ned, who wants to work with me on a more directorial level, said, "I know that the people in this room have a lot to say. I want the rest of the world to know that too."

We ended the rehearsal with a brief introduction to improvisation. I started to explain how great a tool it is for generating stories and encouraging spontaneity, but again, I lost the interest of the group. So instead of talking on and on, I briefly explained the rules for the game *Fortunately/Unfortunately* so that we could give it a try. In this game, one player begins a story with the word "Fortunately." The next person adds to the story, beginning with "unfortunately ..." The next person adds, beginning with "fortunately ...," and so on.

Everyone had something rich and beautiful to add to our story. There was no plot, characters, or consistency of narrative, and I found this incredibly exciting. The urgency and enthusiasm with which each person added to the story was inspiring. It was during this game that I finally began to relax.

After the game was done, Tom gestured for the microphone (some of the participants have difficulty hearing so we use one in our rehearsals), and asked if he could do both a "fortunately" and an "unfortunately." I said, "of course!"

"Fortunately, you are wearing a lovely black sweater." I looked down at my top that has a very high neckline in front but scoops quite low in the back.

"Well thank you!"

"Unfortunately, you are wearing it backwards."

There was a pause, and then the group erupted into uncontrollable laughter. I turned the brightest red. And on that joyful and horribly embarrassing note, our first rehearsal was over.

2 | The names of residents have been changed in order to protect the privacy of the group members.

THEY CAME BACK!

7 April 2012

I arrived at the second rehearsal of the Apotex Theatre Group half an hour early. When I walked in I found that Tom was already there.

He had come early because during the week he had written three pages of a script for our performance. He said that now, when he can't sleep at night, he writes. He had found a straightforward way to merge the giant topics of "life at the Apotex" and "life before the Apotex." We spoke of exploring ways in which they feed each other.

Once everyone else arrived we began talking about what will probably be a major theme of our performance – the community at the Apotex – and then Tom read his script and explained his ideas. The response from the group was supportive and enthusiastic, and we tossed around a few ideas. I think we are going to work well together.

After our discussion we dove right into some vocal acting exercises.

I was a little nervous about this. The group members – none of whom have a background in theatre – are fun and adventurous, but they are also quite serious. I am a trained actor, so I am accustomed to doing strange and sometimes playful or silly exercises, but I take them pretty seriously. I was hoping the group members would understand this and might feel the same way, but I wasn't sure they would.

I had nothing to be worried about. By joining the group, everyone seems to have made a decision to trust the process and to go along for the ride.

And boy were we LOUD!

An energy game that I brought in was also a success. Usually in this exercise the person with the "energy" makes eye contact with whoever is next to them, and then gestures with their hands (often with a clap) that they are "passing the energy" until it makes its way around the whole circle. This is how I demonstrated the exercise.

Once we started, however, a beautiful thing happened. Instead of simply making eye contact and gesturing, each person tightly grasped the hands of the person next to them as they passed the energy. This continued almost all the way around the circle. It was a joy to watch and to be a part of.

I wanted to make the idea of "our final performance" something tangible and to give the group an idea of the sort of thing we could do, so I showed a video of a scene created and performed by a theatre group at a retirement home. The scene we watched dealt with how a person's sense of identity can shift upon moving into a retirement or nursing home.

The discussion following this scene was a balanced mix of the positive and the negative. One woman said that she felt great upon arriving at Baycrest and was excited by all the arts and cultural programming. Some people talked about

the strong sense of community they have discovered. Others said that they have felt lonely since arriving. A few people who have been living here longer were able to assure some newer residents that it can take time to settle in. Everyone had something to say on this topic, and we all agreed that this group provides an effective forum for exploring both the good and the bad freely and without judgement.

TRY US

15 April 2012

When writing about her *TimeSlips* storytelling program in *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia*, Anne Basting stresses the importance of greeting each participant individually at the beginning of every session. I've made a commitment to doing this with my group each week. It sounds so simple, but I've found it very helpful for building a rapport with group members and for ensuring that everyone feels welcome and a part of the group.

After relaxation and vocal exercises and a quick game of *Fortunately/Unfortunately*, we tried playing *The Counting Game*. In this game, a group stands or sits, usually in a circle. Anyone can call out "one" and then any other person can call out "two" and so on. If at any time two people call out a number at the same time, the counting starts at "one" again. When I play this game, the goal is usually to get to ten.

This game requires great concentration and can create a lovely sense of calm and unity within a group. I explained the rules and then asked everyone to close their eyes, relax, and for someone to call out the number "one" if and when they had the impulse to do so.

During the first round one number was called out of turn (I think we got to 4 when someone called out 7). For the next round I changed it up: "Call out any number you like. Be impulsive." And they did. 27. 14. 58. For some reason, hearing numbers called out at random like this was ... beautiful. Those of us in the room who were not participating (volunteers and one resident's granddaughter) were all moved. Something special happened when we allowed ourselves to let go of our ideas of what the game was "supposed to" be.

We spent most of our rehearsal coming up with a fictional story about someone moving into a long-term care home. We gave her a name (Marilyn), a past, and talked about her decision to move there. We talked about how she and her family members each felt about the move and why. We discussed Marilyn's fears about the move, her arrival and first day, and her conflicting emotions. We talked about her first meal, her bedroom, and her first (sleepless) night in her new bed.

This conversation went on for over half an hour. It was dynamic, detailed, and truthful. It seemed as though working with a fictional character gave everyone the freedom to discuss his or her own experiences and conflicting emotions. Everybody had something to say and it felt as though there wasn't a moment to breathe.

In the last ten minutes I asked the group if they would each share something they've learned about themselves since moving here.

Tom said that since joining our group he's discovered that he loves play-writing and that it's a great pleasure and comfort for him. Fay was very sociable before moving in but misses living alone and is having a little trouble adjusting to always having people around. Nadine had always lived a very active life and was surprised to discover how much she enjoys living quietly now. Not all of the responses were so positive. Some people have been feeling lost, and some were surprised at their own negativity.

I think the group is beginning to trust me. I shared my concern that they might think some of my acting exercises were silly. Barry responded, "Try us."

As I was cleaning up, one member's granddaughter who had sat in on our rehearsal asked if she could speak with me. She wanted to tell me how much she loved the session and was so happy to see her grandmother being part of a group like this. She thinks that this sort of model could change the types of programs that are available in nursing homes. I hope so.

A PLEASURE

23 April 2012

In the last couple of weeks, members of the group have been coming forward to express how they want to be involved in our project. Tom is working on his script and is incorporating the group discussions into the text, and Ned would like to work in a directorial role. I'm sure that in the next few weeks everyone's desired roles will begin to emerge.

At our second rehearsal, Barry brought me some of his poems to read. They are beautiful. He wants to recite some in the production and has agreed to let me record him reading a few of them. Last Thursday we met to choose our favourite poems and to begin recording. In the recordings he is at times hesitant, confident, forgetful, angry with himself, and proud. He invited me over again next week so I can bring the edited versions of the poems for him to review.

For the digital storytelling aspect of the project, I will be meeting one-on-one with residents who are not members of the theatre group, to record their stories. Together we are choosing images and music which will be combined with the stories to create short films.

So far I've had three meetings with a gentleman named Edward, and I have approximately two hours of usable material for a project that is supposed to be three or four minutes in length. The stories we will use for the final product are about his time in the war and about his wife, Sophia. The recordings are full of beautiful detail, passion, and humour. His love for Sophia is clear and staggering.

Last week I ran into Edward in the main hall of the Apotex. "Hello my friend!" he called when he saw me. With him was a beautiful older woman. "This is Sophia." I squeezed her hand to say how happy I was to meet her, and she held onto my hand tightly for the whole half hour that I sat chatting with them.

Sophia doesn't say much, but her energy is amazing and it was such a pleasure to spend that time with them. We talked, they sang, and Edward told her some of the stories he had shared with me. While he spoke Sophia looked into his eyes with such trust and love. When I got up to leave, Sophia held my hand even more tightly, looked me in the eyes, and simply said, "A pleasure!"

AC-CENT-TCHU-ATE THE POSITIVE!

1 May 2012

As usual, we began with a game of *Fortunately/Unfortunately*, and this time I asked the group members to choose a pre-determined activity and setting for the story before we got started. This is a common practice in improvisation, and can provide structure and direction for a story or scene. Nadine and Nora came up with "voting in Manitoba." Before we got going I said, "I'm from Manitoba!" to which a few people jokingly said how sorry they were. During the game some participants took the opportunity to say nice things about my home province (a province which, I should note, I love very much), but not everybody was so kind.

Tom said, "Unfortunately Manitoba feels like it's squeezed between two covers. It's got provinces on either side and doesn't have anywhere to go." Norman said, "Fortunately I live far away from Manitoba and can't go. I have many places to go before. To vote ... that's too far for me." Ned said he would hop on a plane tomorrow to go to Manitoba and vote because "it's important that everyone should vote, and I'm going to go back there for that reason."

Every week I start with breathing and relaxation and I go around lightly touching my hands to each person's shoulders and neck to aid with the relaxation. Whenever I'm in a yoga or acting class I absolutely *love* when the teacher places her hands on me to assist my relaxation or stretch. So I thought, why wouldn't I do that here? I think the need for physical contact is universal.

Before I go around I always ask the members of the group to gesture if they would not like to be touched, but so far nobody has done so. I can often feel people's shoulders relaxing with my touch.

When I introduced vocal exercises in the first week, most people participated quietly and tentatively, so I've been focusing on volume and support. Over the last month the group has been getting louder and more enthusiastic, and we are working on supporting our voices from the diaphragm rather than from the throat.

After these exercises we moved on to the *Counting Game* again, and this time right from the start I said to impulsively call out any number in any random order. Success.

Then I said, call out the numbers as though you are very angry. Then happy. Then embarrassed. The work was subtle but focused and animated, as the actors demonstrated their emotional range.

Next we played *What Are You Doing*. For this exercise, one person begins miming an action. For example, she may pretend to be brushing her teeth. Then the next person asks, "what are you doing?" and first person keeps miming that she is brushing her teeth and says a different action. For example, "I'm washing my car." The asker then begins miming washing his car, and then another person asks him, "what are you doing?" and so on. In playing this game, I discovered that the group is itching to interact with improvised dialogue – and they are really good at it. All the pairs got into a back and forth dialogue (another example of letting go of the rules), and every scene was clever – some were even laugh out loud funny.

Nora: What are you doing?

Nadene: I'm putting cream on my face.

Nora: Lovely! Are you going out?

Nadene: Yes, I always like to look good.

Ned: Norman, what are you doing?

Norman: Sitting watching the group here.

Ned: That's very nice of you to watch the group and I hope you get a lot of pleasure from it.

Norman: For sure yes.

Ned: Ok.

The game did not call for any dialogue. Rather, this all happened organically, and I would say out of a *need* for creative expression and interaction.

After these scenes, the group shared tactics that they use to remain positive in their day-to-day lives. Last week I had asked them to prepare for a discussion of this topic.

The responses were diverse: some were practical, some were anecdotal, and Barry's response came in the form of a song ("You've got to accentuate the positive! Eliminate the negative! ...")! Norman said, "I'm happy to come here to stay with the group and learn so much about theatre. I'm always happy to come here, close to each other." This comment speaks to Norman's desire for lifelong learning, meaningful interactions, and creative expression. These core human needs do not just disappear as we age or when we move to a long-term care home.

Fiona wasn't able to make it this week, but she left us a poem to read in response to my question. The poem is about aging, and it is positive and funny and sad and truthful and brave all at once. We discussed using the poem in the play and here's what a few people said about the poem:

Ned: I think she's making fun of herself in her poem. In the different words that she uses. You can think of it as derogatory but it's not. It's really ... how it is today ... and how she's overcoming the thoughts that may come out in the play.

Barry: We're all old people and we always talk about the shape we're in, so that poem can set the tone of the play to come.

Near the end of rehearsal, I asked everyone if they could share something about themselves that they would like the audience to know. I gave an example of a story Katherine had shared with us two weeks before, but in my retelling I got some of the details wrong. Norman and Ned immediately corrected me. Ned then elaborated, and shared his thoughts and emotions about Katherine's story, citing specific details. The people in this group are listening to each other, absorbing what is being said, and reflecting on it.

Once everyone started speaking about themselves as I'd asked, Ned took the opportunity to speak not about himself but about his Personal Support Worker whom he greatly admires. His speech was generous and passionate, and by the time he was done, the Personal Support Worker was in tears.

BINGO!

8 May 2012

During our relaxation work this week, I ask everyone to begin breathing slowly and deeply, close their eyes, and imagine sitting in a peaceful place. I always give the example of a beach, and explain that during this exercise I like to imagine the way the sun feels on my body, the smell of the ocean, the sounds of the waves and the seagulls ... in other words, I ask them to imaginatively engage all of their senses.

A few of the vocal exercises we've been doing involve everyone making some funny sounds, like "ay yay yay!" and "yo ya yo ya." Before we all chanted "ga ga ga ga," I joked that we were about to make sounds like a baby, and I heard one participant say, "No way." I think she felt that making those sounds would be demeaning and I entirely understand and respect that. When we were done I mentioned that if anyone is uncomfortable with an exercise for any reason they can feel free to hold back without fear of upsetting me. I want everyone to be at ease with the work we are doing.

Because of last week's success with *What Are You Doing*, I decided to try a different improvisational game that invites back and forth banter: *First Liners*, where one person in a pair is given the opening line for a scene, and then they improvise a scene from there. As could be expected, the game was great and there were some real hits.

One example:

Barry: I love this song.

Norman: Sing it to me.

Barry: A gaba bo daba! (Barry sings)

Norman: Very good!

Barry: I just made that up!

Norman: Oh – I know.

We laugh a lot in our rehearsals now, and on three occasions someone has spontaneously broken into song.

MEMORIES REVISITED

15 May 2012

This week while everyone was arriving for rehearsal, there was easy banter and joking about our show, our lives, our ages (I have a birthday coming up), and our families. It felt like the beginning of rehearsal for any theatre production. We've become a company.

After everyone had settled in, a few people shared longer stories about their pasts. There has been a lot of talk about a large portion of the presentation being a retrospective of the members' lives, and this has spurred much contemplation, writing, and sharing.

Fay has been particularly enthusiastic about this portion of the performance. She ran a restaurant in Toronto and has spoken about it a number of times in rehearsal. She's brought in photographs and menus and was very happy when I suggested that we meet one-on-one next week to work out a monologue about this time in her life.

This week I asked her to give us a setting for *Fortunately/Unfortunately*, and she chose the restaurant. I then asked her to begin the exercise with a "fortunately," but instead of contributing just a sentence or two she gave us the story of how her restaurant came to be.

I was delighted that she was sharing this story, but while she spoke I felt a familiar itch – the stress of knowing that an exercise isn't going as planned. It's a need to have control – and I happily just let it go. I've loved the way the exercises change depending on how the participants respond and react. This group is teaching me the important art of letting go of my plans and expectations, and I'm discovering that this is where the beauty and magic lie.

The challenge then became how to get the exercise back on track when Fay was done speaking. I did it unsuccessfully. I edited her story, and made a one-line (mis)interpretation of it. I basically made it my own. After thanking her for sharing the story, I said, "so ... fortunately we've bought a restaurant because we want to make people smile." She didn't let me take over her words like that. She answered, "I don't know anything about business! Fortunately it worked out very very well!"

So. Our story. We bought a restaurant, and even though we didn't know anything about business it worked out very well. We had a slow start because the space was small and we didn't have many customers, but the food was really good, and as people got to know us, they kept coming back for more. Unfortunately our customer base mostly only spoke Yiddish, and our staff spoke other languages, so there was a communication breakdown, but nevertheless there was constantly a lineup out the door.

We had some great scenes during *First Liners* this week:

Nora: When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

Ned: How much should I make?

Nora: Just enough for yourself, I don't want any.

Ned: Oh come on, you have to try a little bit.

Nora: If you mix it with vodka.

Ned: Vodka goes very good with it, so I'll put vodka in it for you.

Nora: With the vodka I'll take it. Lemonade and vodka sounds good to me.

With just a few minutes left I checked in with the group to get some feedback on the work we are doing and to see if they had any questions or comments. Here are the responses I received:

Ned: I like it!

Tom: It's damn hard work.

Nora: I didn't know we were going to do a production, so maybe I'm just getting used to the idea. I like coming here. We'll see what happens next.

Barry: I really don't know where it's going, but we'll see in the next few weeks.

Ned: We trust you.

Fiona: I think everything's great.

Fay: I wonder how it's all going to turn out.

I'LL READ

23 May 2012

Before rehearsal I met with Fay to work on her monologue. During our meeting I discovered that she is a poet and songwriter. Much of her work is very personal, and I'm not sure yet whether she will be willing to share anything in the performance, but I hope so. I'm learning that these one-on-one sessions are invaluable, and I will need to meet with everyone in the coming weeks. I have to admit, this is a much larger project than I ever would have imagined.

Fortunately/Unfortunately went around the circle twice this week – not at my urging, but simply because the story just kept on going: “Fortunately a very beautiful girl married a very handsome man.” Unfortunately, according to Tom, “he was already married.” Not to worry, they got married anyway. Of course, there were “consequences” on their first night together, according to Fay, but “fortunately they had got a good lawyer who straightened them out,” said Fiona. Unfortunately, continued Katherine, “the handsome man had a pimple on his chin.” But fortunately the pharmacy was open and he could get some “depimping” ointment. But, added Nora, if she really loved him, the pimple wasn't going to make that much of a difference. “What's a pimple?” concluded Katherine diplomatically, giving the story the final word.

After our relaxation and vocal exercises we did some choral speaking, using the poem that Fiona brought us a few weeks ago, and we worked on technique, subtext, and expression. I had always assumed that when the speaker in the poem says that she “is feeling fine,” she says so in earnest, but the group disagreed with me, saying that this line should be read with cynicism. With this simple choice, the poem has more of an arc, and tells a more compelling story.

For the last twenty minutes we read a portion of Tom's play. I gave copies of the script to Tom and to two other women who had expressed interest in reading it. We needed one more actor, and I asked the group if there was anyone else who would be willing to read a part. There were no responses.

“Nora,” I said, “would you like to read it or would you rather I did it?”

“No, it's ok,” she replied.

“Oh ok, that's fine,” I said, thinking she meant that she didn't want to read and not wanting to push. Nora was hesitant about joining the group in the beginning, and I have been so happy to have her come in and participate each week.

"I'll read," she said. My heart leapt.

So, for the next twenty minutes, four members of the Apotex Theatre Group did a cold reading of a brand new play written by one of our members. Everyone – staff, volunteers, and group members – was blown away.

After discussing the play, Nora said angrily, "Can I please say something?" I was worried. She continued, smiling mischievously: "Last week you told us your birthday was coming up and I think you said it was today, but we forgot to wish you a happy birthday."

I hated telling her it was next week, but said I was so happy that she remembered. "Yes, I remembered," she replied with a smile. And with that, we all said our goodbyes and left for the day.

BREATHE

29 May 2012

This week I had two minor setbacks. One involved a new digital storytelling participant expressing concerns about sharing her story publicly; the other involved someone being uncomfortable and unhappy with the sound of his voice on a digital recording.

I was feeling defeated. Luckily, on my way out of the building, I got a chance to speak with Bianca Stern, who leads the Culture, Arts & Innovation Department at Baycrest. I told her what had happened. She gave me some really sound advice.

First: Breathe.

Second, she reminded me that these individuals are putting themselves and their stories out there in a way that many of them never have done before, and that of course they are going to feel vulnerable and scared sometimes. All I can do is respect that and be sensitive to their reactions.

She suggested finding ways to ensure that the new participant feels that she is in control of the recordings and has agency over her stories, and suggested ways of making the other person more familiar with the sound of his voice. As anyone who has heard their voice on a recording knows, it sounds very different than it sounds in your head. It can be disconcerting to anyone.

Most importantly for me, she told me not to take these reactions personally. Just breathe.

This week the group surprised me with a little birthday party! It was wonderful. We all got cake and everyone sang *Happy Birthday*. I was so happy.

By the time we were done partying it was almost time to go, so we did some choral speaking, chatted a little, and then said our goodbyes.

Until next week!

WHY ELSE WOULD I COME?

5 June 2012

Rehearsal was great this week. *Fortunately/Unfortunately* was funny and animated as usual; we played *First Liners* again; and we played *One Word Story* for the first time (similar to *One Sentence Story*, but each participant contributes just one word to create the group story). People sometimes contributed just a word, but often added a whole phrase or just a sound. It worked beautifully, quickly, and with incredible momentum:

*I have a dog.
Once upon a
time
poor animal
dog,
dogs are good.
bow!
wow!
Cat
meow
Afraid
I don't like cats
Or
Anybody else
Jump
High!
Don't fall
Can't escape
Or
Or injure my nape
Went out
For fun
I laugh
My dog does too
Or
Or he thinks he does!
I smile
My dog giggles
And
I don't believe it
Or
He takes Setlas Powders.*

Come over and see it!
Right!
What time can you make it?
Very early in the morning
Seven
The dogs have been out chasing cats all night
It's too late!
It's never too late.
Call the dog in.
He doesn't like that!
Or
He doesn't like being called.
I'll tell you something else:
He chases the cat.
Happy days are here-
Not with dogs and cats.
Again.
End of story.

I recovered from last week's setbacks, but I left this week's rehearsal with some doubts raised by the group members about whether or not we can pull this off. I know these doubts are unfounded ... but there's still a little voice in my head that says, *what if we can't?*

One question that was brought up was why we've been playing improv games every week when we are supposed to be preparing for a performance. I should have explained this to the group earlier. *I* know that we're warming up our imaginations, learning performance techniques, breaking down inhibitions, and getting creative. We're exploring our impulses, and getting to know each other's. We're building a company. To me, the link to the performance is clear, but it wouldn't be as clear to the group members.

The digital aspect of the project is taking much more time than I had anticipated, and I'm experiencing some setbacks. One of my participants was happy to share her stories with me but didn't want anything to be recorded. I understand entirely, and we spent a lovely hour together, telling each other stories of our lives. Another woman has agreed to make a digital story, but she is nervous and doesn't know whether to trust me or not. She has said that she's not sure that she will like the piece in the end, and I've told her that if she does not want the piece to be shared, it won't be.

I keep telling myself that all I can do is try, and know that the process of creating the piece is just as important as the product.

I need to **breathe** and remain focused on all of the positives.

For instance, the theatre group members are becoming more ambitious, creative, and animated while in rehearsal, and they have all told me that they enjoy coming.

Also, some friendships have developed between people who met in the group! Katherine and Norman often joke together affectionately, and this week they did a little hula dance together during a luau in *Fortunately/Unfortunately*. When it was her turn to speak, Katherine said, “Unfortunately Norman wasn’t in Honolulu with us!” Then she sighed, “Oh Norman. My Norman.”

After rehearsal one day, Barry was going to go outside to enjoy the sun, and Nora said that she would like to join him. Barry replied that he would be delighted. Smiling, Nora turned to me and said, “we seem to enjoy each other very much. I just met him here.” Barry agreed with her, and then she continued, “It’s just nice talking to someone who you enjoy.” She then said, “I sort of feel like we’re here to get to know each other. Before I got here I didn’t know any of these people ...”

At the end of the day, we’re here for the experience of getting to know each other, and hopefully, for our audience to get to know us a little too. We’re here to explore a new skill set, to have fun, to exercise different parts of our brains, to be creative, and to be heard.

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

12 June 2012

Over the last few weeks, Tom and I have been editing his script, and he gave me permission to do some cutting and reorganizing on my own. So I shortened it to what I thought would be a manageable length and brought the script to rehearsal this week for a full cast read-through.

Tom was a little disappointed with some of the cuts that I had made, and I felt quite badly. Each part of this play is precious and meaningful to him, and he’s been up late many nights working on it. It can be difficult and unnerving to work with an editor or dramaturge, and maybe it would be best for us to do any major cuts together from now on. I don’t want to run the risk of taking ownership of it.

Earlier this week I called a meeting with the two Recreation Therapists who I’ve been working with to get a sense of how they think the program is going so far. They assured me that so far it’s been a great success, and gave me some advice. They said that the participants are keen to have a sense of how the final project will look, and suggested that the best way to address this would be to help the participants see the project visually.

So next week I’m going to bring in a giant roll of paper, so we can make a timeline of the one-hour performance. As a group, we’ll come up with the order

of events. The suggestion was to be as specific as possible and plan it down to minute detail.

The other big piece of advice was to focus our rehearsals entirely on the show from now on. This means no more *Fortunately/Unfortunately* or improv games, and it means having just a short and precise warm-up period.

I've decided that, moving forward, I will only be working with the theatre group members to create the digital storytelling aspect of the project, rather than recruiting other residents as I had originally planned. I think I expected everyone to trust me immediately and to jump at the opportunity to tell me all of their personal stories. As I've mentioned, that has not always been the case. The members of the theatre group have already had time to learn to trust me, and they are keen to share their stories.

GROUNDWORK

18 June 2012

Today we created our visual timeline of the performance. This is what we came up with:

Seven of the nine members will be doing monologues. Tom isn't doing one because he feels that his stories are best told in the play he wrote, and Ned is participating in the group as a director rather than as a performer. He has said on numerous occasions that he is interested in helping others tell their stories rather than in telling his own.

About half of the participants have already written a monologue, and the others will have theirs finished by the end of June. I've met with everyone privately at least once to work on these, and I hope to create digital stories with each participant in addition to developing the live monologues.

We will then read the poem that Fiona brought in, and will end our performance with Tom's play. Tom is comfortable with doing an excerpt of it rather than trying to cut down the whole play, and we will have printed copies of the full play for audience members to pick up on their way out.

The digital components of the performance will happen sporadically throughout the hour. These are: three of Barry's poems and Edward's digital story.

We've decided that the actors will have their scripts on stage with them, as we don't want to worry about memorization. There are two actors who have visual impairments, so we will need to come up with a solution for them.

After making the timeline we still had fifteen minutes of rehearsal left, so I took everyone through a quick physical and vocal warm-up, and then we practiced our choral speaking with Fiona's poem. When we were done going through it once, Barry said, "That sounded pretty ragged."

He wasn't lying. I'm hoping we can rehearse it enough with everyone speaking in unison, but if it doesn't work, we'll have to come up with something else. We'll see what happens.

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD!

26 June 2012

There are only five rehearsals left until our performance, and – as luck would have it – we had to cancel our rehearsal this week. In fact, all programs were cancelled because there was an illness going around on our floor, and the people who live on that floor were unable to meet with me.

Three participants who live in a different area were still able to meet.

A major piece of business we discussed was creating a title for our performance. Katherine came up with, "Hooray for Hollywood!" Ned loved that, suggesting that "Hooray for You and Me!" may be more appropriate for our group. We then added the subtitle, "An Evening of Theatre."

I have been concerned about Ned having enough to do for the final performance, because although he has a directorial role in the group, I really would like him to be on stage. This week he voiced that he would like to introduce the performance to the audience.

At one of our first rehearsals he had said, "I know that the people in this room have a lot to say, and I want the rest of the world to know that too." His words to the audience will, no doubt, be very powerful.

I have also been concerned that those participants who have visual impairments wouldn't be able to read a monologue on stage, but we're beginning to solve that problem too.

When Nadine and I met one-on-one last week, we wrote her story out, chose a few key points which she memorized, and practiced a few times. Now she is able to improvise the whole thing while hitting those key points. We've come up with a few questions that I ask her to move her onto the next point.

My fingers are crossed that programs are back on next week, and that the group will be able to meet.

TWO MORE WEEKS AWAY

10 July 2012

Well, our last rehearsal *was* in fact cancelled due to the illness, and then to top it all off, I had to travel home this past week to visit my family. So ... our group hasn't met in almost a month.

I feel good about where we are, but I'm anxious to get the group back together again. Instead of the rehearsal, I had some one-on-ones. I met with Nora to finalize her monologue. She has expressed concerns to me over the last few months that her stories aren't interesting, but if only she knew! Her monologue is terribly charming and touching – it's the story of how she and her husband met and fell in love as teenagers ... I don't want to give too much away, but I'll just say that it includes some confessions about breaking the rules at a summer sleep-away camp.

With just a month left, I've had a lot of planning to do, so most of my time has been spent on coordinating the performance, publicity, technical requirements, organizing a reception, et cetera. In order to ensure that I keep on top of all of this while mostly focusing on the artistic side of the project, I've brought a Production Assistant on board.

Our assistant, Grace Smith, is working on her PhD in theatre, and is a playwright, director, and dramaturge. I'm really looking forward to working with her.

Until next week!

AND ... WE'RE BACK!

17 July 2012

Our first rehearsal back was really productive – we fired through everything we needed to accomplish. I think everyone feels that since we lost so much time we've really got to hustle. There is a buzz in the air nowadays!

We quickly went over the schedule of events for the performance, did some warm ups, and then went right into working on our choral speaking.

After some humming and hawing we decided to try having each person recite two lines on their own, one after the other. It sounded and looked amazing. We all agreed that we preferred it this way. Not only does it sound clearer, but each actor has a chance to showcase their expression and acting skills. It's also quite neat to see how each person approaches the text differently.

A few people shared their monologues, and then we went through Tom's play, *Changing Your Lifestyle*. Since I hadn't been able to meet with Tom in such a long time, I had to make an executive decision on which sections of the play will be read during the performance. Almost everyone was happy with the reading and with the sections that I chose. Most importantly, Tom was very pleased.

As we were leaving, I told the group about the private reception that will follow the final performance – it's a reception just for us – and everyone was

delighted. We will have a champagne toast with petit fours, and lots of hugs and tears and goodbyes, I am sure.

Then Fiona expressed a concern, asking, "What will we do with all the people who came to see us perform? Will we just kick them out?" She's right, this may be a problem. The audience members will most certainly want to spend time with us after the show.

Katherine said, "We'll just say ... 'Au Revoir!'"

Problem solved.

When I met one-on-one with Fay the next day, she told me that she had been practicing her part of the poem on her own. She recited her two lines for me, and her dedication to the meaning behind the words and the pride that she took in the performance of it was just beautiful. I am so happy to share that she has decided that she will sing one of her songs in the performance. Just two months ago she was not willing to do so, and I am so glad that she changed her mind. This is a brave decision, and it will make a powerful addition to the show.

THREE WEEKS TO GO!

24 July 2012

We had another really productive rehearsal and managed to get through the first half of the performance, which includes all of the monologues, and everyone was pleased. I think it was good for us to have a more concrete sense of what the evening will actually look like.

I've had a few one-on-ones with Barry to help him memorize his section of the group poem, as he has visual impairments and will not be able to read the words. During our meeting I gave him a direction that must have seemed detached from the rest of the poem. He thought for a minute, and then responded by saying, "Yes, but I'm part of a whole, right? I need to be aware of and respond to what the people around me are doing on their lines too." We are each a part of a whole, here, and none of us could do this alone.

We are all working really hard, and everyone is dedicated to the performance. Nora has a very quiet voice but is making a pointed effort to speak loudly. Even Barry commented on her improvement. Fay and Fiona are practising a lot on their own. Tom has told his whole family about the performance, and it looks as though they will all be coming. Barry is also expecting a large crowd – he asked for twelve invitations (I was expecting to give everyone four or five!).

Three weeks to go.

SHARE THE JOY

31 July 2012

This week we had our best rehearsal yet. And it was the first time I realized that, with only two and a half weeks until the show, I am going to be so sad when it is all over. I think a lot of people in the group will be, too. We've become quite close.

We read the play twice, and I couldn't believe how well this went. Then, with ten minutes left, we read through our group poem and, like the play reading, it was fantastic. My only directions were, "Be energetic! Be loud! Listen to everyone else when they speak!" The two people who had to memorize their lines did so with no problems and picked up their cues without delay.

My one-on-ones were so nice this week too. Fiona and Barry both told me how much fun they are having, and how much they enjoy the group and our one-on-one time together. Then, when I was meeting with Norman and told him I had to go meet with Ned, he said, "Yes, go share the joy."

SIX DAYS TIL SHOWTIME!

8 August 2012

We're almost there! And we are ready.

One thing I'm finding really interesting throughout this process is watching the different ways the actors are working. Vocal technique comes really easily to some people while others have to work especially hard to speak loudly and clearly. The people who struggle more have been working incredibly hard, and it's amazing to see their effort and determination. I think it's actually visible in the work.

What is also amazing is the support they all show for each other. Those who haven't been struggling as much keep mentioning with awe how much the others are improving, and those who have been struggling often say how much they admire the others' work.

After a read-through of the play, we talked about whether we want to have a talkback at the end of the performance. I would like to have one, so the audience can have a chance to speak directly to the group members about the process. So far, any observations about the group have been filtered through my voice.

One of the Recreation Therapists turned to the group and said, "Let me give you an example of a question someone might ask: Have you been enjoying the theatre group?" There was an instant response from the group. "Oh yeah!" "Yes!" "Of course!" And then we asked everyone to be specific about what they have enjoyed. People talked about meeting new people and becoming friends, about trying something very different and challenging, and about hearing each

other's life stories. Then Norman turned to me and pointed. "We like *her!*" he said, with a big smile on his face.

We then talked about the post-show reception and a few people voiced that they want to be able to invite friends and family. I completely agree: it would be really hard to kick everyone out right after the show. We were trying to cut down on costs, but it wouldn't be worth it.

The Recreation Therapist began asking questions because she is organizing the food. I said something dismissive like, "Oh, don't worry! It will work out ... we'll just get a bit more." Then I laughed because I realized how unhelpful that was. We were all laughing and Tom raised his hand and waved at me to come over with the microphone. He looked at the group and said, "The fairy godmother will bring the cookies!"

After deciding to double our food order, we all said goodbye. One rehearsal left!

It's SHOWTIME!

12 August 2012

One more day! I can't believe it.

I have so many butterflies in my stomach about tomorrow and Tuesday, but I know it is going to be a beautiful show. I won't leave many details of our last rehearsal here just now, because of course it went very well – and I need to get back to getting ready for the big show.

WE Did It!

21 August 2012

I am finding it difficult to put into words the full experience of what has happened over the last five months since the group has been meeting, and especially over the last few weeks leading up to the performance. It has been amazing. Terrifying. Exciting. Moving. Hilarious. Unnerving. Inspiring.

At the beginning, many group members expressed doubts about the group itself, but they kept returning week after week and said they were intrigued and were having a great time. Almost everyone expressed concerns and doubts about our ability to create a finished product, even up to 3 weeks before the performance.

I really can't express how much the people in the group have changed and grown over the last five months. I took videos of almost all the rehearsals, so I have been able to roughly track the group's progress and conduct a qualitative analysis of the effectiveness of the program. I also checked in with participants

throughout the process to find out how they felt about the whole thing. The results have been astonishing. It is so neat to see nine people in their 80s and 90s *excited*.

On the days of the performances, so much of what I saw and heard from the group members was reminiscent of how I felt as an emerging young actress. Being on stage is an intangible experience, and it's why so many people get drawn into the theatre, in spite of the poor odds of ever being able to live above the poverty line and in spite of the constant struggle. The people in this group got to experience this feeling for the very first time, so late in life.

Close friendships and intimate bonds were the facets of theatre that I loved the most as a young actress, and I saw them replicated here at Baycrest. An invaluable outcome of this project has been the connections that were built between group members, the larger Baycrest community, and, I think, beyond. Before the show, the group members were all laughing and talking together easily, and making jokes with each other. Many group members have commented repeatedly on the friendships they have made in the group, with people they had never even met before.

Over the two performances we had between 150 and 200 audience members. It was incredible – and the performers blew everyone away. One audience member, also a Baycrest resident, approached one of the group members a couple days after the show to say how much she loved the performance and how moved she was by it. The actor invited her over to her room later that day so they could talk about it.

Another resident who declined joining the group told me, right after the show, that when he first heard about it he thought it was going to be silly, and he didn't want to have anything to do with it. After watching the production, he had to tell me how wrong he was, and how amazing it was to see these people express and create with such dignity and power.

On our first day back in March, as he was leaving, Barry had said to me, "I am starting to get a glimmer of interest in the project. Just a glimmer." Then just yesterday he said with incredible emotion, "We were just a bunch of ordinary people, there was nothing special or extraordinary about us. I mean, we weren't actors ... And you took us ... you got us all together and now look at us!"

Nadine has said to me a number of times that she would like to keep the group going, because with her vision and hearing problems, engaging is difficult for her. She felt that this was a stimulating and fun experience, and really hopes that it continues. Everyone is really sad that it is over, and they want to keep meeting. I do too. Nora has said that she doesn't know what she's going to do with her Wednesday afternoons. "They're so boring now," she says. Ned has said the same thing. It was very hard to say goodbye.

So for now, I will just say: *Au Revoir!*

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