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Kalala C. Kiwanuka-Woernle

Macalester College, kalala.kiwanuka.woernle@gmail.com

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Let The People Speak: How Verbatim Theater Allows Historically Marginalized
Groups Tell Their Stories

by

Kalala Kiwanuka-Woernle
Class of 2022

A critical essay submitted to the
faculty of Macalester College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Theater and Dance

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I am so appreciative of the wonderful mothers, who entrusted me with their stories and were so willing to talk about their experiences. You are all such extraordinary people and I hope that one day, I will be a mother who pulls from your advice and lived experiences. A huge thank you to my wonderful advisor Miranda Rose Hall, for all of your encouragement throughout the process and all the time you took to make edits and read over the materials. To the wonderful Macalester Theater Collective, thank you thank you thank you for accepting this project with such excitement and fervor, you helped me to see what this project could be. To the Macalester Theater department, thank you for making space for this project to come into existence and for encouraging students to create their own works. To the Honors Committee, thank you for taking the time to read over my materials and for your questions that helped me to reflect on this process as a whole. Of course, to Cláudia, for telling me this project wasn't an option. This is one of the best decisions I ever made. To my own mother, kwaagala nnyo nnyo nnyo. I am so grateful for the life that you have provided me with and for always encouraging me to go for my dreams and farther. I hope to be a mother that is even half as amazing as you are. We need to make space for mothers to tell their stories free of guilt and shame, but instead with acceptance and love.

Kalala Kiwanuka-Woernle

motherhood: the good, bad, and ugly

motherhood: the good, bad, and ugly was born out of my research of Verbatim Theater, specifically the practices of Anna Deavere Smith, The Tectonic Theater Project, and Eve Ensler; and the lack of fully fleshed out mother characters represented in theatre. In my research, I focused on how these different playwrights crafted their plays, identified the topic or event they wanted to explore, and the selection of their subjects. During the pandemic, I had the idea to create a theater piece that would tell the good, the bad, and the ugly of motherhood because in the media especially in the theater I only saw the two extremes of the selfless mother who had zero identity beyond her children and the evil stepmother. I find this trope to be very problematic because it perpetuates the monolithic narrative that once someone has a child, they must put everything else on hold so they can care for their child and be a “good mother”.

Like in the works of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *The Laramie Project*, and *The Vagina Monologues* it was important to me to have stories from various racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, ages, marital statuses, and sexual orientations, but due to time restraints, I recognize that my play does not have examples from all of these identities. To begin my process, I came up with a series of questions like, “Tell me about the day you found out you were pregnant?” and “What are your plans for after your kids move out?”, to prompt my interviewees. My interview process was a bit different from the playwrights that I researched because I conducted one on one interviews and four talking circles that ranged from three participants to six. To select my subjects, I reached out to all the mothers I knew and encouraged them to suggest mothers who they thought would be interested. My reasoning for utilizing different mediums was to make my subjects feel comfortable and also generate as much material as possible in a short period of time. Over the course of the interview process, I interviewed twenty mothers via Zoom and used the software Otter.ai to transcribe their words. The one-on-one interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour, while the talking circles were a set hour, however, they could have gone on for much longer. Following the interviews, I went back to the transcripts generated by Otter.ai correcting mistakes and identifying speakers. Like The Tectonic Theater Project’s process, with the Macalester Theater Collective, the group read the collected material aloud and identified moments that stuck out to them or moments that were

confusing or redundant. After receiving their feedback, I went through four drafts which were overseen by my advisor Miranda Rose Hall, who would give me weekly feedback. We need to make space for mothers to tell their stories free of guilt and shame, but instead with acceptance and love.

Honors Project in THDA Department
Advisor: Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento
THDA Department

In the United States' current political climate, topics like race, sexuality, gender expression, and political affiliation have become increasingly divisive: there is a resistance in engaging with others who have opposing viewpoints and an increase of cancel-culture. Although it is human nature to connect more with people who look like, think, and believe in the same things you do, it is important for one's personal growth to seek out uncomfortable and unfamiliar conversations, and have a desire to learn from other's lived experiences. When individuals take the time to listen to others, there is potential for discovering new ways of thinking. Currently, there is a great need for spaces where conversations can be had across beliefs; verbatim theater makes space for opposing viewpoints to converse—maybe even argue, cry, or scream. The curated sharing of perspectives that verbatim theater fosters has the potential to create change and open people's minds in ways they might not arrive at on their own.

In verbatim theater, a playwright interviews people from different backgrounds. They then select fragments from the transcripts to create a script that is not based on fiction, but on lived experience. From the Living Newspapers to *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *The Laramie Project*, and *The Vagina Monologues*, verbatim theater has been used to bring attention to and tell the stories of people who have been historically missing from theatrical representations. As opposed to other forms of theater, verbatim theater has the potential to make space for both gang members in Los Angeles and rape victims in Bosnia, allowing them to take back their narratives and to tell their stories in their own words. Verbatim theater thrives off contradiction by putting opposing views in conversation with each other. Moreover, this approach to playwriting does not decide for the audience who is right or who deserves their empathy. Verbatim theater is necessary today because it fosters a curated environment where willing audience members can

choose to get outside their comfort zone and hear a variety of perspectives that may open their minds and perhaps lead to actionable change.

Verbatim Theater: The Creation Process

Creating a verbatim theater piece usually begins with a question or a series of questions the playwright believes will generate strong stories that can become a full script. In the preparation stage, many playwrights will get to know their interviewees personally and build relationships with them so that interviewees will feel comfortable speaking about themselves when the process transitions into the interviewing stage. Different playwrights might go about the interview process differently, but for Anna Deavere Smith, the playwright of *Twilight: Los Angeles*, and Moises Kaufman, the lead playwright of *The Laramie Project*, interviewing a large number of people from different racial, political, and economic backgrounds is important for generating as much and varied content as possible. It is common for interviewers to conduct multiple interviews with each interviewee, to avoid limitations such as time. During the interview, playwright will often record their conversations to later transcribe them. These transcripts become the raw material they will craft in creating the script. After the interview phase, the playwright acts as an editor and is tasked with fitting the transcripts together, editing stories that may be too long, or leaving out parts that do not fit. The goal of the playwright is to create a final script that tells a cohesive story giving voice to different groups of people and a range of perspectives.

Documentary theater is another type of non-fiction theater similar to verbatim, that uses clips from newspaper articles, videos, and podcasts in addition to one-on-one interviews. Despite the fact that documentary theater often retells historic events, it has also received criticism

similar to those directed at verbatim theater because there are concerns that the playwright's feelings and opinions effect how the story is told. While it is absolutely true that the playwright can never be completely objective in the process, they do not have control over what their interviewees say and the material generated. Peter Cheeseman, the pioneer of theater-in-the-round and documentary musicals, believes that in the case of documentary or verbatim theater, the playwright is not in charge of writing the play itself, but rather they are responsible for determine how the information is delivered and how it affects audiences.¹ The idea that playwrights are in control of the interviews is somewhat incorrect because their main tasks are asking questions, listening, and recording oral narratives. The play that emerges from the selected fragments of the raw material express the opinions of the interviewees endowed with their own thoughts and feelings. However, the questions the playwrights asks and the parts they think are the most important are based on their own biases and interests.

Robin Belfield, a British verbatim theater writer and director, whose 2018 book *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theater*, describes the genre as being especially pertinent today, writes: “We are besieged with a constant barrage of information [with] different media platforms all barking for our attention and especially now, in the current climate of ‘fake news,’ the integrity of that information is unclear. Verbatim theater offers an antidote to all that and it's at its best when it offers a voice to the voiceless.”²

¹ Hend Mohamed Samir Khalil, “The Death of the Author in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre: A Study of Dramaturge Authorship in David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*,” *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* (September 2021): 173. <http://internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/theijhss/article/view/155135/107455>

² Zoe Paskett, “Why Verbatim Theatre Gives a Voice to the Voiceless,” *Evening Standard*, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/why-verbatim-theatre-gives-a-voice-to-the-voiceless-a3847026.html>

Traditionally, theater has been an art form dominated by white men who direct, write, and produce plays and musicals. Until very recently, it was considered acceptable for white men to write and direct plays about racial and ethnic groups that they did not belong to. I take the award-winning *West Side Story* as an example: while the musical was one of the firsts to provide BIPOC artists with an opportunity to perform on Broadway, *West Side Story* was conceived by choreographer Jerome Robbins with book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and music by Leonard Bernstein. As such, the musical tells story of characters of color through a white lens and perhaps unsurprisingly, heavily relies on stereotypes and tropes. In an interview about Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* remake, Lin-Manuel Miranda describes his love-hate relationship with the musical: "For Latinos, 'West Side Story' has been 'our greatest blessing and our greatest curse...It also represented our foot in the door as an artistic community on Broadway. ... At the same time, because it's just about the only representation of Latinos on Broadway and it's about gangs, that's where it gets tricky."³ *West Side Story*'s creators, a group of Jewish men, also authored many other famous musicals like *Gypsy* and *Peter Pan*. While the men are undoubtedly very talented, when working on *West Side Story* they did not seek out any input from members of the Puerto Rican community as they wrote the Sharks, characters steeped in Puerto Rican culture. Though *West Side Story* was groundbreaking when it first premiered on Broadway in the manner that it drew attention to racism in the United States, the authors' approach to write the musical was problematic because it perpetuated stereotypes and took away Puerto Ricans' autonomy in telling their own stories. By using verbatim theater techniques while

³ Catherine E. Shoichet CNN, "The Old 'West Side Story' Got Half the Story Wrong. Spielberg's New Film Tries to Make It Right," *CNN*, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/11/entertainment/west-side-story-puerto-ricans-cec/index.html>.

writing *West Side Story*, the musical's creators would have been more successful in depicting the true experiences of the Puerto Rican characters.

Federal Theater Project and Living Newspapers

In the United States, verbatim theater began during the Great Depression with the 1930s Federal Theater Project's Living Newspapers of the 1930s.⁴ To combat economic hardship, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created New Deal policies, which the Federal Theater Project (FTP), a nationwide theater initiative, was born out of to provide theatermakers and performers with jobs. Hallie Flanagan, a professor of Theater History at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, was chosen to serve as the artistic director of the project. It was Flanagan's goal to produce plays that employed as many actors as possible and educated audiences with important news stories that were also accessible for individuals who could not afford newspapers or could not read. Within the first year, the FTP demonstrated measurable success: 15,000 previously unemployed workers earned a weekly wage of \$23.86, which is worth about \$476.45 today⁵. While teaching at Vassar, Flanagan taught a class about European Theater, which covered the contemporary political theatre of Weimar, Germany, including the works of Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, and Kurt Weill.⁶ Through studying their work, Flanagan became fascinated with *Lebende Zeitung* [Living Newspaper], a theater medium that retold the news in a radical and engaging way. Flanagan decided that the medium would fit the FTP's mission perfectly since it could provide news to illiterate audiences, and large casts required lots of actors. At its highest popularity, the

⁴ Stuart Cosgrove, "The Origins of the Living Newspaper", Royal Court, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://royalcourttheatre.com/the-origins-of-the-living-newspaper/>

⁵ "Value of \$23.86 from 1935 to 2021", CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1935?amount=23.86>

⁶ Ibid.

FTP was running as many as twelve Living Newspaper productions at once. Playwrights worked on shift systems to ensure the scripts were updated, but they could also change them if news stories broke or new information was discovered.

One of the FTP's most successful plays premiered in Seattle, entitled *Spirochete*, which was commissioned in response to the Surgeon General's declaration of war on venereal disease. There were many concerns about the reception of a play about syphilis, but the FTP's main desire was to make sure the play did not come across as a lecture, but rather as a piece of the theater that included "elements of family drama, dark comedy and harrowing illness."⁷ It was also crucial to the FTP to make the piece accessible in part due to the large percentage of middle-class audiences that were most likely to be affected by the illness. In the lobby of the theater, the FTP set up a testing booth and invited VIPs like a Catholic Bishop to encourage people to get tested and start a conversation about preventative methods. The production was a major success: almost 3,000 people were in attendance, during its run and awareness was spread about syphilis and how to prevent it.

Anna Deavere Smith

Playwright, actress, author, journalist, and educator, Anna Deavere Smith is credited with introducing verbatim theater to the United States with her first play *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, which debuted at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1992.⁸ *Fires in the Mirror* tells the story of the Crown Heights riots that occurred in 1991 in Brooklyn, New York, following the death of a seven-year-old Black child, Gavin Cato, after "a

⁷ Stuart Cosgrove, "The Origins of the Living Newspaper", *Royal Court*, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://royalcourttheatre.com/the-origins-of-the-living-newspaper/>

⁸ "Fires in the Mirror", *Wikipedia*, accessed October 9, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fires_in_the_Mirror

member of the Lubavitch branch of Hasidic Judaism lost control of his car, jumped the curb, [killing him].”⁹ This tragic event led to high tensions between the Black and Jewish communities in Crown Heights. Following the riots, Smith traveled to that Brooklyn neighborhood where she conducted about a hundred in-depth interviews with people in the Crown Heights community. The result was *Fires in Mirror*, a one-woman verbatim theater play consisting of 29 different characters, for which Smith won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding One-Person Show and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.¹⁰

During interviews, Smith would note gestures that were unique to her subjects. In preparation for performances, a majority of Smith’s process was listening to the taped conversations, learning how to mimic speech patterns, inflection, and accents. Smith was never pretending to *be* the characters she was portraying; she was a vessel for their words to be spoken aloud. It is always obvious to audiences, that it is Smith undertaking the various characters she is portraying. Unlike in more traditional styles of acting, where actors try to divorce themselves from characters by removing their own gestures or speech patterns, in Smith’s portrayal of her interviewees, she is still somewhat ever present.

Anna Deavere Smith strives to tell the stories that are often overlooked in theater: “The desire is to create theater that is fuller than traditional theater—that allows us to see more kinds of people represented.”¹¹ There are many groups of people who do not go to the theater because they do not see themselves represented on stage and thus they cannot relate to the stories that are told; or simply do not have access to theater for reasons ranging from ticket prices to the absence

⁹ “Introduction, *Fires in the Mirror*,” *Encyclopedia.com*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/fires-mirror>

¹⁰ “Drama Desk Award - 1993 | Winners & Nominees,” accessed December 8, 2021, <http://awardsandwinners.com/category/drama-desk-award/1993/>.

¹¹ “Wearing the Words: An Interview with Anna Deavere Smith”, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, September 15, 2021, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/wearing-words-interview-anna-deavere-smith/>

of theater venues in their neighborhoods. Creating plays that feature diversity is important to Smith, but she does not define diversity as a term exclusively related to race. In an interview with the *Buddhist Review*, Smith states that the demographics of theater audiences is the outcome of the fact that most productions have been created to appeal to elite white audiences, and that must change. Smith explains the best way to welcome diverse audiences is to stop viewing theater as a “precious thing that only certain people can see, more than high art, but as communities”.¹² Perhaps that’s part of what draws Smith to verbatim theater, a theatrical genre that celebrates multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives.

In May of 1992, artistic director and producer of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles Gordon Davidson commissioned Smith to write a one-woman show portraying the Los Angeles riots that followed the verdict of the policemen who brutalized Rodney King in 1991.¹³ In March of 1991, Rodney King, a black man, was pulled over by the LAPD following a high-speed chase because he had been speeding. King was nearly beaten to death by four white police officers, which was recorded by a nearby resident and used as evidence in the police officers’ trial. In May of the following year, the four police officers were tried and found not guilty; “The city exploded. The verdict took the city by surprise, from public officials to average citizens... Three days of burning, looting, and the killings scarred Los Angeles and captured the attention of the world.”¹⁴ *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* is the fourteenth part of Smith’s project *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, a series of solo pieces that she created

...to capture the personality of a place by attempting to embody its varied population and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) xvii - xxviii

¹⁴ Ibid.

varied points of view in one person myself. Her series is a work-in-progress, its aim being the isolation of *the* American character through the dramatization of its many voices, the “different people” who “are shaping it.”¹⁵

The one-woman show depicts the reactions of Los Angeles residents who were both directly and indirectly impacted by the events following the verdict of the policemen in the Rodney King case. Smith conducted about two hundred interviews from California Congresswoman Maxine Waters to a local gang member Twilight Bey, the play’s namesake. In the original script, Smith was only able to include about twenty-five characters and their stories due to time constraints but added more characters later on.

The set of *Twilight; Los Angeles, 1992* was mostly bare, except for a large screen showing subtitles and video footage of Rodney King and Reginald Denny being beaten, as well as moments from the Los Angeles riots. Smith's costume was also simple: she wore a white button-down shirt with black slacks, a base outfit to which she added accessories, hats, and jackets. The real magic of the show comes from the instant quick changes that transform Smith from one character to the next. Through the entire performance, the audience's attention is held in anticipation of the next character, each with their own mannerisms, speech patterns, and inflections. Smith shows her mastery as a storyteller as she links monologues that nearly contradict each other when she pairs the interview with Stanley K. Sheinbaum, former president of the Los Angeles Police Commission, with the testimony of Michael Zinzun, representative of the Coalition Against Police Abuse. The monologues share these individuals’ reactions to the police violence that Rodney King endured and to the subsequent Los Angeles riots, but also

¹⁵ Cengage Learning Gale, “A Study Guide for Anna Deavere Smith's ‘Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992’” (Detroit: Gale Research) 8, <https://www.scribd.com/read/385749519/A-Study-Guide-for-Anna-Deavere-Smith-s-Twilight-Los-Angeles-1992#>

capture the wide range of realities that interviewees were living through and the events that stuck out most to them.

Before every monologue in the script, Smith provides a description of the person she interviewed and the environment where the interview took place. Sheinbaum's surroundings are described as

A beautiful house in Brentwood. There is art on all the walls. The art has a real spirit to it. These are the paintings by his wife, Betty Sheinbaum. There is a large living room, an office off the living room which you can see. It is mostly made of wood, lots of papers and books. The office of a writer. There are glass windows that look out on a pool, a garden, a view.¹⁶

while the environment of Zinzun's interview is described as,

In his office at the Coalition Against Police Abuse. There are very bloody and disturbing photographs of victims of police abuse. The most disturbing one was a man with part of his skull blown off and part of his body in the chest area blown off, so that you can see the organs. There is a large white banner with a black circle and a panther. The Black Panther is the image from the Black Panther Party. Above the circle is "All Power to The People."¹⁷

While Sheinbaum gets to enjoy the luxury of being interviewed in his own home where he is surrounded by his wife's beautiful paintings and a nice view of his pool, Michael Zinzun is sitting in his office surrounded by traumatic images of police brutality. This is the real Los Angeles, where the disconnectedness across class and racial lines explains why the Rodney King

¹⁶ Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) xvii - xxviii

¹⁷ Ibid.

verdict was so polarizing. For some, it was a wake-up call; for others, it was the continuation of oppression and racism.

In the introduction of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith refers to the events in Los Angeles as well as to race relations in the United States when asks “Where does theater fit into this?” She answers her own question saying, “Theater can mirror society. But in order to do that theater must embrace diversity. It must include new characters in our human drama that have not been portrayed on our stages... We now have the opportunity to be a part of discovery of a larger, healthier, more interesting picture of America.”¹⁸ Smith's work shows the possibility of a more interesting conversation when the words of Stanley K. Sheinbaum are placed next to those of Michael Zinzun; as a playwright exploring verbatim theater, Smith makes room for both truths to coexist without judgments or filters.

Smith's intention in traveling to Los Angeles following the verdict in Rodney King's case was to listen to the voices of the community and reiterate their stories in a dramatic form. Although Smith's work makes space for a variety of viewpoints, she has received criticism for not taking a clear stance on given issues and for creating work that is considered by some as apolitical. To her critics, Smith responds saying the benefit of not taking a political stance is, “You know more. That's political power,”¹⁹ an approach that opens her audiences up to new ideas and growth.

As a Black woman, Smith recognized how her own lived experiences may influence the stories and characters she would select for *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. To avoid biases, Smith enlisted four collaborators who were different races and had professions outside of theater:

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Wearing the Words: An Interview with Anna Deavere Smith,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, accessed December 8, 2021, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/wearing-words-interview-anna-deavere-smith/>.

Dorinne Kondo, a Japanese American anthropologist and feminist scholar; Hector Tobar, a Guatemalan-American reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* who covered the riots; Elizabeth Alexander, an African American poet and then professor at the University of Chicago;²⁰ and Oskar Eustis, a white resident who was the associate artistic director at the Taper, where the play was commissioned.²¹ They acted as dramaturgs as Smith created *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Typically, a dramaturg's role is to provide information and context about themes and topics in play; in the case of *Twilight*, because Smith was the playwright, these dramaturg's task was to "[assist] in the preparation of the text of the play and [offer] an outside perspective to those who are more active in the process of staging the play."²² Smith and the four dramaturgs met up after every preview performance of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* to discuss it. Smith's biggest concern throughout the process was that the script would lean towards racial tensions between Black and White people, and so overlook the experiences of other groups. During those meetings, Kondo and Tobar, who did not identify with either group, were very outspoken about the need to accurately portray and include many different racial groups' positions. Dramaturgs are often overlooked in many theater processes; in the case of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, the absence of the input and lived experiences of Kondo and Tobar could mean that Smith would have left out the stories of people who did not identify as Black or White. Dramaturgs are key to the theatrical process in that they alert playwrights and directors of their blind spots.

In addition to bringing new voices to the forefront of conversation, Smith also blurred the lines of race in *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, by performing characters that were not Black.

²⁰ After her time at the University of Chicago, Alexander taught at Yale University for 15 years. She has served as the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation since 2018.

²¹ Eustis has served as the Artistic Director of the Public Theater in New York City since 2005. Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) xvii - xxviii

²² Ibid.

During the interview process, Smith took great care in forming relationships with all the individuals she interviewed to make sure that she was performing them as accurately as possible. To gain her interviewees' trust and create flow in the conversation, Smith would often start an interview with one of three questions: "Do you remember the circumstances of your birth?"; "Have you ever been accused of something that you did not do?"; and "Have you ever come close to death?"²³ These three questions were passed on to her by a linguist, who used them to help people let the guard down. While questions like these did not directly relate to the verdict that fueled the Los Angeles riots, they helped make Smith's interviewees comfortable talking about themselves and their lives

In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, Smith "[delivers] some of her monologues in Korean and Spanish or plunging into the frazzled minds of inarticulate street people who desperately want to be heard,"²⁴ telling the stories of individuals who have been historically missing from theatrical representations. When *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* first premiered in the 90s, rather than viewed as cultural appropriation, an actor's performance of other races and cultures was accepted and actually common on both the stage and screen. In time, the casting of underrepresented groups has become a crucial part of theater professionals' conversations about representation and their right to tell their own stories. What separates Smith's playing of characters outside of her identity from cultural appropriation is that she does not pretend to be the people she interviewed; instead, "[She] works by means of deep mimesis, a process opposite to that of 'pretend.' To incorporate

²³ [A Search for American Character] | C-SPAN.Org, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?77289-1/a-search-american-character>.

²⁴ David Richards, "Review/Theater: Twilight -- Los Angeles, 1992; A One-Woman Riot Conjures Character Amid the Chaos," *The New York Times*, March 24, 1994, sec. Theater, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/24/theater/review-theater-twilight-los-angeles-1992-one-woman-riot-conjures-character-amid.html>.

means to be possessed by, to open oneself up thoroughly and deeply to another being.”²⁵ The characters that Smith performs are not fictional and her goal is not to hide her own identity as she plays them, but instead to serve as a vessel that brings their words to life and puts them in conversation with other viewpoints. It is important to keep in mind that Smith does not always perform characters that she identifies with or whose opinions she agrees with. “She’s not trying to get audiences to love the characters, just to make them willing to hear these lives and perspectives juxtaposed against each other in the no-place that’s the stage,”²⁶ so the power of her verbatim plays comes from the space for reflection she creates. Smith’s verbatim theater also allows audience members to imagine a world different from the one they know while acknowledging that change is hard and takes work: “No performance by itself can alter the routines of everyday life, but . . . theatre can provide ‘what if’ images of potential community, sparking the kind of imaginative work that must precede substantial changes in customary habits.”²⁷ There has to be a true commitment to change, but first one needs to learn how to listen.

Tectonic Theater Project and Moment Work

In July of 1991, Moisés Kaufman and his husband, Jeffrey LaHoste, founded the Tectonic Theater Project (TTP), a theater company created to explore theatrical language and form.²⁸ During TTP’s early years, Kaufman borrowed exercises from the deconstructivist/postmodern movement to create works that helped TTP answer questions that he was interested in exploring. This process of asking questions led to the creation of the Moment

²⁵ “Fires in the Mirror | Encyclopedia.Com,” accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/fires-mirror>.

²⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Moises Kaufman, Lisa S. Brenner, and Barbara Pitts, “Moment Work: An Interview with Tectonic Theater Project | JHUP Theatre,” July 2, 2016, <https://jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/volume-26-number-2-july-2016/moment-work-interview-tectonic>.

Work method, which Kaufman defines as “writing performances as opposed to writing texts.”²⁹

In Moment Work rehearsals, the main focus is not the text per se, but what the moment calls for—whether that is the integration of elements such as lighting, sound, or even puppets.

Moment Work goes beyond what is included in the text by identifying modes that will help tell the story of the play like puppetry or the integration of movement. In an interview with Drew University Professor Lisa S. Brenner for the academic journal *Theatre Topics*, TTP member and Moment Work instructor Barbara Pitts and Moisés Kaufman, discuss the application of Moment Work when creating a theater piece and how it encourages collaboration and play amongst a cast in a way that that would not be possible in traditional rehearsal processes that focus mainly on the text.³⁰ During the interview, Pitts describes her process of using Moment Work to devise *Thread City*, a dance-theater piece she devised at Eastern Connecticut State that tells the story of the community’s fabric-making industry. While *Thread City* is based on interviews, the dance ensemble decided to not use text so as to be more inclusive of members of the local Hispanic community. Their decision considered access by removing language barriers. To tell the community’s stories, *Thread City* uses lighting, movement, images, and found objects to stage their narratives in a way that empowered the ensemble to go beyond the bounds of language. One of TTP’s core values is to ensure that “everyone has a voice in the creation of new work” and Moment Work helped them achieve that goal in *Thread City*.³¹

On October 7, 1998, in Laramie, Wyoming, Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old college student at the University of Wyoming, was abducted and attacked by Aaron McKinney

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Moisés Kaufman, “Moment Work: An Interview with Tectonic Theater Project | JHUP Theatre,” accessed December 10, 2021, <https://jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/volume-26-number-2-july-2016/moment-work-interview-tectonic>.

³¹ “Home,” Tectonic Theater Project, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/>.

and Russell Henderson. They beat him up and left him to die because he was gay. Shepard miraculously survived the attack and was discovered eighteen hours later by a cyclist. Shepard died five days later at a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. What would eventually become *The Laramie Project* first started out as a question that Kaufman posed to his theater company in reaction to Shepard's tragic death: "What can we do as theatre artists to respond to this incident, and, more concretely, is theatre a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events."³² Kaufman and nine members of the Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie a month after Shepard's death to interview members of the community and learn more about the area and its residents. From the beginning, Kaufman was clear that the play should not be about Matthew Shepard or his killers, but a piece of verbatim theater about Laramie and its 27,000 citizens.

Unlike Anna Deavere Smith's process, *The Laramie Project's* script emerged from interviews conducted by multiple members of the Tectonic Theater Project. They each focused on a particular aspect of the Laramie community that piqued their interest. Early on, the group realized that their different interests would help create a more detailed picture of Laramie that included the distinct experiences of ranchers as well as those of the small group of individuals who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community, for example. In speaking about the interview process in Laramie, Kaufman admitted he and his company members initially had many misconceptions and preconceived notions about the population, but they quickly realized their assumptions were incorrect and were amazed by the community's willingness to participate and share their stories. After the first trip to Laramie, the company got together in New York to read

³² John Moore, "How 'The Laramie Project' Changed Theatre – and the World - Denver Center for the Performing Arts," Denver Center for the Performing Arts, February 25, 2020, <https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/how-the-laramie-project-changed-theatre-and-the-world/>.

over and edit the transcripts of the eighty interviews they had conducted. They were blown away by the material and knew that it had great potential. In January of 1999, the members of the Tectonic Theater Project started a three-week workshop process in which they used Moment Work to break down the transcripts and identify moments that they could build on in the play. After going through all the material, the artists arranged and rearranged the order of the interviews and conducted a ninety-minute reading. After hearing the stories read aloud, Kaufman decided a smaller group, called The Writers Group, would continue the interviewing process in Laramie. The Writers Group was led by Leigh Fondakowski and included Stephen Belber, Greg Pierotti, Stephen Wangh, and Kaufman himself.³³ That same year, TTP traveled to Laramie four more times to conduct interviews and cover Aaron McKinney's trial. As the group collected more material, the three-week workshop sessions included the addition of theatrical elements such as lighting and sound as they created this verbatim theater's "Moments". In the end, TTP had interviewed two hundred individuals ranging from investigators on the case to some of Shepard's close friends.

It was important to Kaufman and members of the TTP that *The Laramie Project* premiered in the West because it was where the horrific event had occurred. Donovan Marley, the artistic director at the Denver Center Theater Company, saw the potential in the project:

For the theatre world, it was a validation of Moisés Kaufman's brilliant vision of creating important topical works for the theatre by total immersion of his actors in researching the story and then developing the text together. But the broader and more important legacy is the impact on the audience of the ensemble's humanizing of Mathew Shepard so that a

³³ Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001

homophobic America could find a son or a brother crucified on a Laramie fence — and resolve to change the culture.³⁴

Marley took a chance on Moisés Kaufman and TTP even though they had not finished writing the verbatim theater piece when he *included The Laramie Project* in his season. It was important to Marley to feature a piece that would address the violence and murders of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community and the voiceless had a space to speak.

During the original production of *The Laramie Project*, the verbatim theater play began with all eight cast members on stage. The set was sparse: five brown tables, each surrounded by one or two chairs. The opening monologue explains the Tectonic Theater Project's process of creating *The Laramie Project* and presents information about the death of Matthew Shepard. The stage is mainly backlit with white light and can only be described as feeling simple. In the Director's Notes of *The Laramie Project*, Moises Kaufman writes:

The set is a performance space. There are a few tables and chairs. Costumes and props are always visible. The basic costumes are the ones worn by the company of actors. Costumes to portray the people of Laramie should be simple: a shirt, a pair of glasses, a hat. The desire is to suggest not recreate. Along the same lines, this should be an actor-driven event. Costume changes, set changes, and anything else that happens on the stage should be done by the company of actors.³⁵

In a *New York Times* review of *The Laramie Project* from 2000, Ben Brantly recognizes that *The Laramie Project* pulls from Anna Deavere Smith's interviewing methods to write a play: “[*The Laramie Project*] feels less clinical than Ms. Smith's works in presenting its subjects, and the

³⁴ John Moore, “The Enduring Legacy of ‘Laramie,’ Two Decades Later,” *AMERICAN THEATRE*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/02/26/the-enduring-legacy-of-laramie-two-decades-later/>.

³⁵ Kaufman, Moisés. *The Laramie Project*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001

lack of distance is not always an asset,”³⁶, referring to the fact that the names of the TTP members are in the play’s list of characters. Unlike in Smith’s approach to verbatim theater, since she refuses to express her own thoughts and feelings about the individuals or how the interview went, members of the TTP are characters in *The Laramie Project* who share their thoughts from the journals they kept while in Laramie and reenact moments from the interviews with residents. Brantley goes on to say that while the play captures the emotion of that moment, the portrayals of the Laramie residents are not as convincing, “only a few of its members have anything like Ms. Smith’s ear for revelatory speech patterns and are able to summon portraits that feel correspondingly authentic.”³⁷ In response, I find that it is important to recognize that Smith’s intention behind writing her plays is to capture the people she is interviewing, while Moisés Kaufman and TTP traveled to Laramie, WY to capture the town as a whole.

Throughout the performance, actors go back and forth between performing monologues and performing moments. The piece also counts on a narrator who guides the narrative by identifying the 60 different characters the actors portray and providing necessary context them. What *makes The Laramie Project* compelling is how its format constantly changes, as actors quickly shift from speaking to the audience as if in a soliloquy to performing characters in partner scenes.

The Laramie Project ran at the Denver Center Theater Company from February 26 through April 1, 2000, when it moved to the Union Square Theater in New York.³⁸ Going into opening night, the company was very nervous about how audience members would react. *The*

³⁶ Ben Brantley, “THEATER REVIEW; A Brutal Act Alters a Town,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2000, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/19/movies/theater-review-a-brutal-act-alters-a-town.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ John Moore, “How ‘The Laramie Project’ Changed Theatre – and the World - Denver Center for the Performing Arts,” Denver Center for the Performing Arts, February 25, 2020, <https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/how-the-laramie-project-changed-theatre-and-the-world/>.

Laramie Project was one of the first plays to address the violence and murders of members of the LGBTQ+, so TTP was pleasantly surprised by the Denver community's welcoming reception of *The Laramie Project*. When the play was moved to an Off-Broadway stage in New York, *The Laramie Project* was not a commercial success. Members of TTP worried that *The Laramie Project* would begin and end with its original company, but slowly the play began to gain popularity. In the 2002-2003 theater season, there were 440 professional, amateur and school productions of the piece.³⁹As time progressed, *The Laramie Project* was added to more and more high school course syllabi and college theater seasons in recognition of the need for conversations about homophobia and violence against members of the LGBTQ+ community. In 2002, HBO released a filmed version of *The Laramie Project* starring Laura Linney, Peter Fonda, Steve Buscemi, and Christina Ricci. The film brought greater attention to the play and has been viewed approximately twenty million times to date.

Social and political change are part of the Tectonic Theater Project's core values, but Kaufman believes all theater is inherently political: "if we're doing the work well, the work will end up portraying, representing many different sides of who you are as a human being. So yes, our work is political and our work addresses social ideas, as well as all the other forces that shape our lives."⁴⁰ The process of creating *The Laramie Project* proved that verbatim theater was the perfect medium for TTP to tell as many stories about the people of the Laramie community as possible. While Moisés Kaufman and the members of the TTP could have focused only on Matthew Shepard's murder, they recognized the importance of making space for a broader

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Moises Kaufman, "Moment Work: An Interview with Tectonic Theater Project," *Theatre*, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/volume-26-number-2-july-2016/moment-work-interview-tectonic>.

spectrum of narratives. Verbatim theater allowed them to include individuals who are overlooked and give the residents of Laramie the opportunity to speak their truths and tell their stories.

At the beginning of *The Laramie Project*, many characters share their opinions about their hometown. One description that especially stands out is Jedediah Schultz's, a Theater major at the University of Wyoming:

If you would have asked me before, I would have told you, Laramie is a beautiful town, secluded enough that you can have your own identity... A town with a strong sense of community... Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime... We're a noun, a definition, a sign. We may be able to get rid of that... but it will sure take a while.⁴¹

The Laramie Project helped change audiences' opinions about the town of Laramie and its residents because they were humanized in the performance. TTP showed American spectators that a horrific event like Matthew Shepard's murder could have happened anywhere in the country.

Unlike its predecessor, the Living Newspapers, contemporary verbatim theater has become very personal because it tells the stories of many individuals, leaning into the complexity of the lived experiences of human beings instead of conveying news stories. *The Laramie Project* is frequently performed throughout the United States and around the world today. Kaufman says,

I think part of the reason *The Laramie Project* has endured the way it has and then started to make us identified as a theatre for social change is because there was so much rigor about the structure of the play. And so it has endured, whereas, you know, maybe some

⁴¹ Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), <http://archive.org/details/laramieproject00kauf>.

other forms like the Living Newspaper, pieces that were much more responding to the current moment, they don't necessarily endure.⁴²

Since its premiere at the Denver Center Theater Company in 2000, an estimated ten million people have seen *The Laramie Project* in twenty different countries in thirteen different languages and 100,000 copies of the script have been sold.⁴³ The script has been used in classrooms to teach about hate and discrimination and the need to create space to speak the truth about marginalized groups. While the media spent its time making assumptions about the events leading to Shepard's horrific death, TTP took the time to know Laramie residents, extending an ear for them to express their emotions and process the horrible event that took place. Laramie, Wyoming is not the obvious choice of setting a playwright aspiring to a Broadway run would choose, but Kaufman saw the humanity in its residents and how important it would be for the American public to hear their stories in their own words. In the original production of *The Laramie Project*, actors performed the monologues or moments of the people they themselves has interviewed, making the enactment of their stories even more personal: "The audience was just one degree of separation from the actual person, and the connective tissue was the empathy of the actor."⁴⁴

Apart from its great success, *The Laramie Project* has the merit of launching a national dialogue about hate crimes and homophobia. In 2009, President Barack Obama invited Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project to the White House to witness the

⁴² Moises Kaufman, "Moment Work: An Interview with Tectonic Theater Project." *Theatre*. accessed December 10, 2021, <https://jhuptheatre.org/theatre-topics/online-content/issue/volume-26-number-2-july-2016/moment-work-interview-tectonic>.

⁴³ John Moore, "How 'The Laramie Project' Changed Theatre – and the World. Denver Center for the Performing Arts," Denver Center for the Performing Arts, February 25, 2020, <https://www.denvercenter.org/news-center/how-the-laramie-project-changed-theatre-and-the-world/>.

⁴⁴ John Moore, "The Enduring Legacy of 'Laramie,' Two Decades Later," AMERICAN THEATRE, February 26, 2020, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/02/26/the-enduring-legacy-of-laramie-two-decades-later/>.

signing of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which criminalized hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation. The invitation was a public recognition of *The Laramie Project* and the Tectonic Theater Project's commitment to social and political change. Unfortunately, *The Laramie Project* is just as relevant today as it was twenty-two years ago when it first premiered. In 2018, the FBI reported the number of hate crimes motivated by bias or prejudice was at a sixteen-year high, evidence that there is still more work to do.⁴⁵ What started out as one-on-one interviews with the residents of Laramie transformed into a national reckoning to change the perception of the LGBTQ+ community. *The Laramie Project* brought the audience's attention to the need to protect the members of the queer community and pushed for the criminalization of hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation.⁴⁶

Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*, and V-Day

The Vagina Monologues is a series of fictional monologues created by Tony Award-winning playwright, performer, author, and activist Eve Ensler. The play premiered as a one-woman show at the HERE Arts Center in New York City on October 3, 1996.⁴⁷ Although the play is not an example of verbatim theater, its examination is useful since Ensler's writing included researching and collecting stories in a manner that was similar to Smith's and Kaufman's approach. What distinguishes *The Vagina Monologues* from *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *The Laramie Project* is Ensler's choice to write fictional characters based on the

⁴⁵ Adeel Hassan, "Hate-Crime Violence Hits 16-Year High, F.B.I. Reports," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2019, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/hate-crimes-fbi-report.html>.

⁴⁶ "About Tectonic," Tectonic Theater Project, accessed December 9, 2021, https://www.tectonictheaterproject.org/?page_id=13675.

⁴⁷ "'Vagina Monologues' Playwright Eve Ensler: 'My Whole Life, I've Been Waiting for an Apology,'" *Washington Post*, accessed December 12, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/vagina-monologues-playwright-eve-ensler-my-whole-life-ive-been-waiting-for-an-apology/2020/01/31/30e84512-30c3-11ea-9313-6c8a89b1b9fb_story.html.

women she interviewed and conversations with her friends. Rather than following a single narrative thread, the playwright combined several of these stories when they intersected thematically.

While at first Ensler did not set out to write a play about vaginas, she credits a conversation she had with an older woman about menopause as the initial spark for this project. Although the older woman was a self-proclaimed feminist who Ensler greatly admired, during the conversation she described her vagina as being dead and dried up, saying that she did not want to go near it, and neither would others. Ensler was disturbed by the way the older woman described her body, which made her realize that she had never taken the time to think about how she viewed her own vagina or how her friends viewed theirs. In an effort to answer these questions for herself, Ensler started posing questions to her friends like "What would your vagina say if it could talk?" and "If you could dress your vagina, what would it wear?"⁴⁸ Ensler was shocked by how willing women were to answer her questions and their honesty about their vaginas. In the opening monologue, Ensler describes the 200 different women she interviewed in preparation to writing the monologues: "Older women, young women, married women, lesbians, single women, college professors, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers, African American women, Asian American women, Hispanic women, Native American women, Caucasian women, Jewish women."⁴⁹ Ensler wanted her play to be a space for women to speak for themselves, so she tried to include as many experiences as possible. Based on their stories,

⁴⁸ "If Your Vagina Could Talk: The Vagina Monologues," *ThoughtCo*, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-vagina-monologues-overview-2713541>.

⁴⁹ Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard, 1998), <http://archive.org/details/vaginamonologues00ensl>.

Enslar created fictional monologues that discuss everything from sex, love, tenderness, embarrassment, cruelty, pain, and pleasure.⁵⁰

Oftentimes, after speaking with Enslar, women would suggest the names of friends who would have interesting stories. The interviewing process for *The Vagina Monologues* was one of the first spaces where women were encouraged to talk about their bodies and feel comfortable enough to share stories of abuse and assault; for many, the conversation with Enslar was the first time they told their story because of stigmas that forced them to keep silent. When *The Vagina Monologues* first premiered in the 90s, the word “vagina” was still very much a taboo. It would not come up in casual conversation because it was seen as a dirty word. Including the word vagina in the play’s title forced people to start saying it out loud, a step towards normalizing the word and easing the discomfort around using it. After many of Enslar’s performances, audience members would stay after the show because they were curious how she had gotten so many women to talk about their vaginas and their personal experiences. She explained that “At first women were reluctant to talk. They were a little shy. But once they got going, you couldn’t stop them. Women secretly love to talk about their vaginas. They get very excited, mainly because no one’s ever asked them before.”⁵¹ Enslar created a space for women to reimagine their identities as sexual beings and not feel ashamed talking about their bodies as society forced them to be for so long.

The Vagina Monologues was hailed as progressive and ground-breaking but was also controversial because it included monologues dealing with rape and abuse, topics considered off-limits when it premiered in the late 90s. As a survivor of sexual assault herself, Enslar

⁵⁰ “If Your Vagina Could Talk: The Vagina Monologues,” *ThoughtCo*, accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-vagina-monologues-overview-2713541>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

understood the importance and healing that can come from talking about abuse and rape, saying, “I say ‘vagina’ because I want these bad things to stop. I know they will not stop until we acknowledge that they're going on, and the only way to make that possible is to enable women to talk without fear of punishment or retribution”⁵² As she observed the audiences' reactions to the monologues about abuse and rape, Ensler realized there was a need for more education about violence against women, which led to the creation of V-Day.

On February 14, 1998, *The Vagina Monologues* were performed by a star-studded cast that included Glenn Close, Whoopi Goldberg, Lily Tomlin, and Goldie Hawn. That production raised \$250,000 dollars for anti-violence groups like Safe Horizon and Sakhi.⁵³ V-Day is now a global activist movement for preventing gender-based violence against all women (cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities), girls, and the planet. Over \$120 million dollars have been raised for anti-violence groups, rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and safe houses through V-Day, shattering taboos and changing the way activists realize their goals.⁵⁴ Eve Ensler helped shift how Americans talk about female sexuality and vaginas by creating a safe space for women to speak openly about their bodies, sexuality, and experiences.

Conclusion: The Potential of Theater

Although verbatim theater does not have the power to put an end to hate crimes by itself, it can start difficult, hard-to-foster conversations that may lead to shifts in culture and changes in the legal system. Anna Deavere Smith, Moisés Kaufman, and Eve Ensler belong to identities that have been historically marginalized by the theater: they are a black woman, a gay Jewish

⁵² Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues* (New York : Villard, 1998), <http://archive.org/details/vaginamonologues00ensl>.

⁵³ “Home - V-Day,” V-Day, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.vday.org/>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

immigrant, and a Jewish woman, respectively. Their awareness of their intersectional identities allowed them to lean into their privilege as theatermakers and work to tell the stories of those less privileged than them. They could have written plays inspired by their own experiences, but they recognized the importance of hearing from a variety of perspectives. Their plays make room for multiple voices, even when the playwrights did not agree with the point of view of their interviewees. In an article for the Skoll Center for Social Impact Entertainment, Ensler explains that she views the Theatre as a holy church where people can gather and learn from one another:

When I started, I thought it was my obligation to teach people my politics and my point of view, but what I quickly learned is that's not how people change. They change through dialectic, through hearing people in dialogue and challenging one another... If you are writing about social issues, your job is not to communicate what you feel—it is to communicate what characters feel. You need to crawl into the bodies and minds of people you don't agree with so you can allow that point of view to be fairly and clearly communicated.⁵⁵

In the Aristotelian form, a character's existence ends when the play ends. This is not the case in verbatim theater, because the people whose stories it tells are not fictional; they continue on with their lives long after a production has closed. It is different to hear an actor playing a fictional character talk about their child's murder and to listen to a performer speak the words of Dennis Shepard, Matthew Shepard's father. The latter experience is a powerful tool for engaging the audience and, in turn, lead to a broader cultural change and ignite activism. Verbatim theater brings the power of performing real people's words on stage: when audience members attend plays like *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *The Laramie Project*, or *The Vagina Monologues* they

⁵⁵ "How The Vagina Monologues Demonstrates the Power of Theatre," *The State of SIE Report* (blog), February 14, 2019, <https://thestateofsie.com/the-vagina-monologues-eve-ensler-political-theater/>.

may not agree with every character's point of view, but they cannot overlook the fact that what they are hearing are the life stories of real people.

motherhood: the good, bad, and ugly was born out of my research of Verbatim Theater in the Fall of 2021, specifically the practices of Anna Deavere Smith, The Tectonic Theater Project, and Eve Ensler; and the realization that mothers in the theater were being represented inaccurately. In my research, I focused on how these different playwrights crafted their plays, identifying a topic or event they wanted to explore, and the selection of their subjects. During the pandemic, I knew I wanted to create a theater piece that would tell the good, bad, and ugly stories of motherhood because in media and especially in the theater I only saw two extremes represented: the selfless mother with zero identity beyond her children and the evil stepmother. I find these tropes very problematic because they perpetuate the monolithic narrative that once a person decides to have a child, they must put everything else on hold to be a "good mother".

Like in the works of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *The Laramie Project*, and *The Vagina Monologues* it was important to me to include stories from various ages, sexual orientations, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and marital statuses, but due to time restraints, I recognize that my play does not represent all of these identities. To begin my process, I came up with a series of questions like, "Can you tell me about the day you found out you were pregnant?" and "What are your plans for after your kids move out?" to prompt my interviewees. My interview process was a bit different from the playwrights that I researched because I conducted one-on-one interviews and four talking circles that ranged from three to six participants. To select my subjects, I reached out to mothers I knew and encouraged them to suggest mothers whom they thought would be interested in being interviewed. My reasoning for using different media was to make my subjects feel comfortable and generate as much material as possible in a short time period.

Over the course of the interview process, I interviewed twenty mothers via Zoom and used the software Otter.ai to transcribe their words. The one-on-one interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour, while the talking circles were set for an hour, however, they could have gone on for much longer. Following the interviews, I went back to the transcripts generated by Otter.ai to correct mistakes and identify individual speakers. Like The Tectonic Theater Project's workshop process, I shared the transcripts with the Macalester Theater Collective, who read the material aloud and helped me identify moments that stuck out to them, moments that were confusing, and share general ideas for where the project could go. Initially, I intended to include parts of all the twenty interviews, but through conversations with my advisor and time constraints, I decided the story would be best if I focused on a select group of stories that told different types of stories. When I first drafted the project, all the stories were going to be direct address monologues like in *The Vagina Monologues*, but through conversation with my advisor, I realized to create an arc in the story there had to be cohesion in the stories, and a sort of through-line that connected it all, which is why the stories are interwoven into each other. Also, because the majority of the material was generated during talking circles, I wanted some of that process and connections between the subjects to show up in the play. Like the character, Consistent says at the very beginning:

“I don't feel like mothers get to speak their truth about how this ain't always fun. There are some truths that I think we don't get to share, and we worry about being judged about sharing *just* how *challenging* this can be. You can love them a *whole* lot. But sometimes you really might not like your children or not be able to say out loud, ‘Look, this was *hard*. I don't know what was going on.’ Hopefully, this will help to shift the narrative about motherhood.

From the start of my process, it was important to me that the mothers I interviewed had the space to openly speak about their experiences and the realities of motherhood that have been covered up for too long. Verbatim theater is powerful because it allows individuals to take control of their

narrative and tell their stories in their own words. As someone, who has never had or raised a child, I could not have written a play that accurately portrayed motherhood through observations alone, but verbatim theater allowed me a way in by creating a space for mothers to speak free of guilt and judgment. Going into the process, I did not know what to expect because I had worries that the mothers would shy away from talking about their personal lives, but very similarly to what Eve Ensler described when writing *The Vagina Monologues*, many of the mothers I spoke to had never been asked to reflect on their experience or wanted to share their experience in hoping that other mothers' experiences could be different than their own, which was powerful. I do not think audiences can leave this play unchanged because of how honest and raw these stories are. A great deal of motherhood is sacrifice and putting your child before yourself, which I was aware of before this project, but I didn't understand how much sacrifice that is. I hope this play will begin a conversation about motherhood, allowing mothers to speak about the good, bad, and ugly free of shame and guilt because all of those parts are important and human. For too long our society has forced mothers to pretend that they aren't human beings with hopes, dreams, and desires, my hope is this play will allow them to reclaim some of that agency again.

motherhood:
the good, bad, and ugly

by:
Kalala Kiwanuka-Woernle

Email: kalala.kiwanuka.woernle@gmail.com

Phone: 617-898-8064

CHARACTERS

CONSISTENT - Born in Tennessee, raised in Detroit

FLEXIBLE - Born in Washington, D.C.

NURTURING - Born in Boston

FAIR - Born in Philadelphia

PASSIONATE - Born in San Marcus, TX (Direct and to the point)

FACILITATIVE - Born in Boston

AGENTIC - Born in the Twin Cities, MN

ACTIVE - Born in East Africa, Uganda

LOVING - Born in Haiti

DEVOTED - Born in Fort Worth, TX

GETTING IT RIGHT - Born in Boston via Jamaica and Philly

MOTHER WHO TEACHES - Born in Kansas (Yes, there are Black people in Kansas)

TOUGH LOVE - Born in London (Fast)

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH - Born in West Roxbury, raised in Wellesley, MA (Dry Humor)

PROUD - Born in Newton, MA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

motherhood: the good, bad, and ugly was born out of my research of Verbatim Theater, specifically the practices of Anna Deavere Smith, The Tectonic Theater Project, and Eve Ensler; and the realization that mothers in the theater were being represented inaccurately. In my research, I focused on how these different playwrights crafted their plays, identifying a topic or event they wanted to explore, and the selection of their subjects. During the pandemic, I knew I wanted to create a theater piece that would tell the good, bad, and ugly stories of motherhood because in media and especially in the theater I only saw two extremes represented: the “good mother” who had zero identity beyond her children and the “bad mother”. I find these tropes very problematic because they perpetuate the monolithic narrative that once a person decides to have a child, they must put everything else on hold to be a “good mother”. Like in the works of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *The Laramie Project*, and *The Vagina Monologues* it was important to me to include stories from various ages, sexual orientations, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and marital statuses, but due to time restraints, I recognize that my play does not represent all of these identities. To begin my process, I came up with a series of questions like, “Can you tell me about the day you found out you were pregnant?” and “What are your plans for after your kids move out?” to prompt my interviewees. My interview process was a bit different from the playwrights I researched because I conducted one-on-one interviews and four talking circles ranging from three to six participants. To select my subjects, I reached out to mothers I knew and encouraged them to also suggest mothers whom they thought would be interested in being interviewed. My reasoning for using different media was to make my subjects feel comfortable and generate as much material as possible in a short time period. During the interview process, I interviewed twenty mothers via Zoom and used the software Otter.ai to transcribe their words. The one-on-one interviews ranged from twenty minutes to an hour, while the talking circles were a set hour, but they could have gone on much longer. Following the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts generated by Otter.ai to correct mistakes and identify individual speakers. Like The Tectonic Theater Project’s workshopping process, I shared the transcripts with the Macalester Theater Collective, who read over the materials aloud and helped me identify moments that stuck out to them and shared general ideas for where the project could go. I am so appreciative of the wonderful mothers, who entrusted me with their stories and were so willing to talk about their experiences. You are all such extraordinary people and I hope that one day, I will be a mother who pulls from your advice and lived experiences. A huge thank you to my wonderful advisor Miranda Rose Hall, for all of your encouragement throughout the process and all the time you took to make edits and read over the materials. To the wonderful Macalester Theater Collective, thank you thank you thank you for accepting this project with such excitement and fervor, you helped me to see what this project could be. To the Macalester Theater department, thank you for making space for this project to come into existence and for encouraging students to create their own works. To the Honors Committee, thank you for taking the time to read over my materials and for your questions that helped me to reflect on this process as a whole. Of course, to Cláudia, for telling me this project wasn’t an option. This is one of the best decisions I ever made. To my own mother, kwaagala nnyo nnyo nnyo. I am so grateful for the life that you have provided me with and for always encouraging me to go for my dreams and farther. I hope to be a mother that is even half as amazing as you are. We need to make space for mothers to tell their stories free of guilt and shame, but instead with acceptance and love.

IN THE UNITED STATES, PRESENT DAY

CONSISTENT:

I feel like I need to write up a blog for mothers because I don't feel like mothers get to speak their truth about how this ain't always fun.

There are some truths that I think we don't get to share, and we worry about being judged about sharing *just* how *challenging* this can be.

You can love them a *whole* lot.

But sometimes you really might not like your children or not be able to say out loud,

“Look, this was *hard*. I don't know what was going on.”

Hopefully, this will help to shift the narrative about motherhood.

FLEXIBLE:

I'm supposed to say, an adjective, correct?

It's really hard to pick one.

I really believe and strive to be flexible.

NURTURING:

Uhhh...

I hope I'm nurturing.

A warm and nurturing mother.

CONSISTENT:

The first word that came to mind for me is consistent.

FAIR:

I think...

Uhh.

Fair is the kind of mother I'm going to be.

PASSIONATE:

I guess the way//passionate is how I would describe myself and as a mother.

FACILITATIVE:

I— would use facilitative as an adjective that describes my mothering.

AGENTIC:

I would use...

An adjective is hard.

I'm struggling with this.

I want to, this isn't really an adjective, but maybe it is *agentic*?

Like I try to create space for my kids to figure things out on their own. And I don't know what adjective that is.

So a lot of words.

ACTIVE:

Active is what I would say active.

LOVING:

I will describe myself as I guess, a loving parent.

DEVOTED:

I'd describe myself as devoted.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

The word that I would use?

One word?

There's so many words.

Just really wanting to get it right.

So that's where I am.

MOTHER WHO TEACHES:

What sort of popped into my mind is I've always asked myself this question:

Am I a mother who teaches?

Or a teacher who mothers?

You know, What lesson did you learn from this? What did you learn?

So, I guess a mother and teacher.

TOUGH LOVE:

I would describe my mothering as tough love, but I see my role as a teacher.

I want to say not an enabler, more in terms of I'll tell you what's wrong. I'm tough but he knows absolutely that I love him.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

I would say my mothering style is... umm
I would say to a degree protective and tough. I tend to you know... yea.
Protective and tough.

PROUD:

Just one...
Ughhh...
Let me think about it...
Proud

MOTHER WHO TEACHES:

And the second question is where I am from, correct?
I'm from the state of Kansas.
There are Black people in Kansas.
People always ask me:
Are there Black people in Kansas?
There are Black people in Kansas, me and the family next door, but there are Black people in Kansas.

CONSISTENT:

Born in Tennessee, raised in Detroit.

FLEXIBLE:

I'm originally from Washington, D.C.

NURTURING:

I was born in Boston. I live in Boston still.

PASSIONATE:

I'm from San Marcus, Texas.

FACILITATIVE:

I am from Boston, originally and now.

FAIR:

I was born in Philadelphia.

AGENTIC:

I'm from the Twin Cities, originally.

LOVING:

I am from Haiti.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

I am originally from West Roxbury, Massachusetts, but I have been in Wellesley for most of my teenage and adult life.

DEVOTED:

I was born in Fort Worth, Texas, but I live in Boston.

ACTIVE:

I'm originally from East Africa, Uganda.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

I'm from Boston, Massachusetts. I was born here. My parents are from Jamaica. My mom's from Jamaica, my dad's from Philly.

TOUGH LOVE:

I am originally from London. I now live in Georgia. After spending fourteen odd years in Boston.

PROUD:

I was born and raised in Newton, Mass.

pregnancy, becoming a mother

MOTHER WHO TEACHES:

I was not expecting to be pregnant at all.

I really wasn't.

Because I'd been using birth control. Their father and I decided you know:

you come off birth control, it's probably gonna be a while before you ever get pregnant because your body got to get back in the rhythm. So, I was like:

Eh, it's gonna be a loooong time before I get pregnant.

And *no*, it wasn't. God had other plans. So, I was shocked. I was shocked, but then again, I got into this whole mode.

I started really getting excited.

CONSISTENT:

I cannot recall who I told first.

I cannot recall even when I found out in the moment but what I can say is...

If there are already cracks in your relationship, being pregnant, announcing it, all these things will amplify or exacerbate those cracks. So what I can recall is this.

I was and probably still am a hopeless romantic in some ways. And so I had these visions of some rom-com –

(fairytale-like) you tell the man you're pregnant and the birds are fluttering. It's going to be this wonderful thing, we're going to celebrate, he's going to start talking to my belly, rubbing me down with oil every day, so I don't get stretch marks...

I don't remember any of that happening. I don't remember his response, but I just remember thinking:

Man, this wasn't what I had envisioned.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

So I --

I was 23 when I got married and my husband was twentyyyy — seven.

We were married for nine years before we had our first child. So, it was a *very* big adjustment.

My husband continued to, you know ...

behave...

and be what he wanted to be.

He liked the idea of a child, but I basically was the single parent from the get-go.

I gave birth, came home two days later, and um, he left that night and went to play softball.

So, I was by myself.

I was a single parent from the get-go and when I would say you know:

Can you stay home?

or whatever, it was basically:

I stayed with you in the hospital. What more do you want?

FACILITATIVE:

When I found out my firstborn was gonna be a boy – or was gonna be a boy inside me.

I wept.

And I didn't know what was coming up exactly. But I was on the phone with a girlfriend just like with this deep sense of sorrow, and I think, as I processed it, kind of started with the pregnancy and as he was a baby, what was coming up for me was:

I don't know how to raise....

I don't know what like this really responsible, kind, balanced masculinity looks like.

Like what is the version of like, a really good person, who also grapples with the fact of like, being a man within the patriarchy, right.

I was like, I don't know what that looks like.

And I don't know... I don't know how to do this.

I felt like:

I know how to raise a strong girl
Like I can do that.
I don't know how to do that with a boy child.

And so, his dad has a lot of responsibility and care there.

But that was a big early concern.

ACTIVE:

It's that piece of wanting to make sure that my kids are accepted for who they are and seen in their true spirits. And this sense of safety.

In terms of my parenting so much has been around infusing as much as I could of my culture to make sure that they really had a good sense of who they are and knowing their history.

But I think it's that piece of how is the outside world gonna view them?

Are they gonna see them as beautiful spirits who have so much to offer to the world??

And really wanting to raise good human beings, you know, because I feel like, we need good people.

We *need* good people and because of the field that I work in, social work, I see so many hurting children.

So, I just felt like I needed to really be there and nurture them, as much as I can. And then pray.

Pray, every day. Every day.

NURTURING:

You just can't help but feel the pain in terms of how this country treats Black men.

I've got a son and a grandson, and my grandson is 6'6 and my son is 6'2 and they're big and they have presence and they've got swag and they don't back down.

That's a lot of my largest concern and then you know my fears for my daughter are just that she's fully realized.

That people appreciate her, and she can make her way in a world with the necessary amount of assertion and aggression to get what she needs out of life, but also that she's treated well.

FAIR:

There is nothing more life-changing in that you're not just responsible for yourself and your decisions aren't for yourself.

And I would even say the way that you think about the world, and the kind of world that you want is a world that will be safe for your child in a way that's different.

I think like even little things like the kind of TV I would watch. I stopped watching Law and Order because I couldn't handle when they would do things to kids anymore.

“No!! You can't kidnap the children like that. That could happen.”

I think about everything just feeling different and the weight of how every minute of your day is scheduled to either be doing something for another person or doing something that relates to another person, in a way that like you don't take care of your spouse the way you have to take care of a child.

Especially like when you're breastfeeding, when you literally are the cow that is responsible for another human being.

Like that is a huge life change, where you have to like think about your body in a different way.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

I realized that it was necessary for me to be a better mom by taking my space.

So, my space consisted of waking up early in the morning for the last two years to just exercise and pray and then get on with the day. And you know, that has really helped volumes for me.

Because I need to recharge by being by myself. I can't recharge in the presence of always being surrounded by people. I've just been more of an introvert in that way.

Even in my job, I'm constantly working with kids and parents and teachers and staff and people. So, I'm always on, you know, and then I would come home and be with my kids, lovely and always on.

So, what I found was that the tension that I would exude at different times was not good for my kids.

FAIR:

I breastfed for the first 11 months, and just even the first time you pump in public or breastfeed in public like what that means. I always thought of it as like cow-like behavior.

Right here, right now, because I have somebody to take care of.

That is more important than having my shirt all the way on in a public space like you never don't have your shirt all the way on in a public space.

How do you take care of your body, like a shower being an optional thing? That if you get to it like that's a thing you do is not a thing I thought about.

NURTURING:

The shower part resonates. I remember just trying to keep a cooler with yogurt beside the bed to make sure I at least had one thing to eat during the day, because it was so overwhelming and so all-consuming, and my time was never my own.

FAIR:

Do I have time for a shower today?

That was part of how the day started. It just impacts everything, but also with this sense of love and grace and just knowing this is the most important thing you'll ever do so and if you didn't have that love, the mad inconvenience of it would not be tolerated.

And so, it has to be both the way the hormones make it your number one priority.

LOVING:

I feel like everything I do is like around my kids, maybe because they are still so young because I have nineteen, fifteen, and thirteen and I feel like, whatever I'm doing, I need them with me.

So, if we're not together, I don't feel like it's right for me to do something for myself. I don't know, because I don't know how to? Or I'm so close to my kids.

Also given the fact that I've lost so many before now, God blessed me with three children, I want to enjoy as much time as I can with them. And I've never seen any reason to do anything for myself.

AGENTIC:

I went out to dinner with a couple of friends.

My kids are probably 10 and 14 or something. They're probably a little bit younger than that.

And I of course was worried for their *safety*, but I was just down the street, so they knew where I was. I had a phone. They had phones. And I didn't make dinner for them.

But there was stuff in the refrigerator. So, I told them:

Help yourself, you can make a sandwich, you can have leftovers, do whatever. If you need anything, I'm just down the street.

And it was a school night. They both had homework to do. And one of them had to create a dodecahedron out of paper. None of it was put together yet, but he had all the paper and he had to glue it together and make this kinda complicated geometric shape. And he was probably I think he was like in fourth grade.

So, I went out to dinner. I had a lovely time, and on my way home all I could think about is:

What is in store for me when I walk in that door?

Is there going to be crying?

Is there going to be running around naked?

Is there going to be fighting?

Like am I really prepared for this?

FACILITATIVE:

I feel really proud of fostering really curious critical thinkers and like when we do reading time together, they get to pick a book, I get to pick a book and I'm always like:

Okay, sorry, you're getting your Black history lesson now. I picked a biography

and they're like:

Aww mom

but then they're like:

Wait, so you're telling me that....

And then they just ask the most profound questions. Recently, both of them separately came to me about the fact that they're forced to stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance at school. And I was like:

I could email your teacher if you don't want to do it.

And they're like:

Okay, Mom has my back.

So, I like knowing that they know I will have their back but also that they don't take anything as a given.

AGENTIC:

I had that one moment that everything seemed to work out right, and I think my expectations were: it was all gonna totally fall apart, and I was delighted to see that they were able to take responsibility and do what they needed when I was gone, right? Like they didn't need me at all at that moment which felt good.

ACTIVE:

In my culture there's a Proverb, that your kids become your sisters, you know, and at some point, they become your mothers.

So, I ah...

I see that and it's great because there are moments that they teach me stuff.

Which is just like wow.

I'm really grateful for that.

NURTURING:

I look at my back at my kids now with enormous gratitude.

I like the people they've become, and you know, when you get into teen years, you're not sure you're going to get there. It's like:

The Martians have taken my child. When is my real child coming back?

But my children are both over thirty now and it's an entirely different universe.
It's a wonderful thing.

PASSIONATE:

I'm proud of the relationship that I have with my son.

He's 22 and he still lets me love on him and kiss on him when he is around, and just still is that mama's boy. He'll still calls me mommy or says mommy and those are things that he did when he was little.

You know, I guess I was a helicopter mom now looking back because I was single for a long time. So, he had to take care of himself in the morning and get himself off to school because I was traveling to my work. And I had to be there a lot earlier than him and he was at a different district. So, I had to do a lot of thinking for all of us, for myself, for him.

DEVOTED:

It strikes me that there's something else that we need to name.

I've been public about the fact that my first pregnancy was actually when I was a sophomore in college, and I had an abortion.

And it was back in the day when abortions were illegal.

I did not go through some of the things that often accompany illegal abortions, I didn't get an infection.

I was not hospitalized, I didn't die.

I wasn't sterile.

I mean, I can imagine that we're all in a privileged position, where we were excited about our pregnancies.

But let us also name that it's not always that way.

partners, parenting, and support

CONSISTENT:

I know one of the things I've struggled with over the course of my life is the spirit of comparison.

So, I heard other people's stories like:

Oh, he rubbed her down with coconut oil every day. She didn't have any stretch marks.

I didn't have any of that. And I know for a fact that with my second child, my husband and I had been separated for nine months, and he came back, and we made a baby.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

I -- I can remember being pregnant and in the mall with my mother and I'm seeing a family in the mall. You know, the father pushing them stroller, toddler, and all this stuff. I knew then:

That'll never be me. I will never be in a mall with you know, a whole family situation.

I think,

I think looking back, he probably never really wanted to have kids, but you know, I was 32 and I was thinking, you know...

MOTHER WHO TEACHES:

The kid's father was excited. He was in his internship residency, so he was as excited as he could get, you know, working,

three nights on, one night off

or four nights, on one night off.

And *then* 18 months later, my father was up to visit me, and he said before he left, he said:

Sabrina, you're pregnant

I said:

Daddy get out of here. I just had a baby. What do you mean I'm pregnant? How you know, you ain't no doctor.

He said:

You're pregnant.

And sure enough, I was pregnant with my second child.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

We had a second child. We ended up divorcing and it was just not a healthy marriage. It wasn't a healthy partnership.

When we told the kids we were divorcing, my son pulled me outside and said:

“All you have to do is do what he says and then he doesn't get mad.”

So, I think that's where I view myself as a protective mother.

I had the support of my parents. But, you know, in terms of my husband and his family, I didn't have that much support.

All the while I was meant to be working full time, bringing a full-time paycheck home, and then behave like a 50s housewife.

I have a son and a daughter, and I am very vocal about you know, I've never dated since I've gotten divorced. I've been divorced since 2012. I have *no* interest in it. I'd rather stick a *knife* in my eyes than ever get involved with another man.

PASSIONATE:

We were auxiliary brains.

Myself and my partner now, were his second and third brains, to tell him what to do.

So, his senior year, was probably the year that I'm like:

You're going off to college and I'm not going to be there.

I'd already made plans to move in next to him and be there with him so that I could make sure that he was okay.

And he surprised me. He surprised me.

"Mom, I got this. As a matter of fact, I'm two steps and ten steps ahead of you. I got this. I've already done this. I've done this. I'm working on this."

And to this day, I'll tell him hey, remember to do this. I'm still the auxiliary brain. I have it so embedded in myself.

FLEXIBLE:

Daily juggling.

Am I Mom?

Am I a wife?

Am I a woman?

Do I focus on my career?

A lot around just kind of identity and those different identities coming out in different places and different times with different people in different contexts.

PROUD:

When I got married, I had just finished my graduate degree in physical therapy. And I got a job pretty easily, right, actually, during the end of my graduate program, and then had to *move* when I got married because of my husband, because of my husband's job.

Moved out of state, moved to New York, and that's where I had my two children. But *his* profession was 100% demanding and made him exempt from *all* duties within the household and really, in caring for the children.

Sooo, I started working right away. I got a job as a full-time physical therapist, but then I got pregnant. We had free housing because he was a college coach.

Gone, never around.

So, I was able to stay home with my first child. Went back for a little bit but got pregnant with my second right away.

We were out of state.

We didn't have family around.

So, I was the one taking care of the children, and the house, and everything. And I *definitely* did not think that was where I would be, because I'm a worker.

FLEXIBLE:

Interestingly, the father of both my children was a wonderful dad and still is a wonderful dad. Very caring, very involved, very doting.

We're no longer together.

And actually, I think what was hard was the loss of ... kind of my identity as a woman in the relationship.

There was so much involved in caring for the kids, raising the kids, what the kids needed, and they benefited from that greatly.

PROUD:

It was always really important for me and my identity to have my own thing and not just be a coach's wife and have no self-worth. So, I worked part-time PT. And then I fell into coaching college gymnastics.

I was coaching, being a mom, being a PT, not really being such a wife, (laughs) cus he was never around. And when he was around it was like date night, one night a week.

You know, so I had to like make this whole life and community for myself, even though we were married, and I had connections because of him.

(beat)

God, and it goes on and on.

Because then...

The marriage gets broken up, and I have to move home back home, and then I start being a single full-time working mom out of necessity. (laughs)

And I took the first job that I got offered. Because it was convenient. Because it was flexible.
BE. CAUSE. OF. MY. KIDS.

LOVING:

Given the fact that I've lost so many before now, God bless me with three children, I want to enjoy as much time as I can with them. And I've never seen any reason to do anything for myself.

You know, everything I do, includes my kids, everything I do.

My husband on the other side, that's not for him. He's like:

You always with those kids, you always have those kids.

So even if we have to go out and eat, he's like:

Babe, we're gonna go out

I'm like:

No, we have to wait for the kids to come home. So, we all can go together.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

I needed to be able to take that space to reset, and my husband was really great at helping me balance because you know I really did want to get everything right.

I was constantly thinking:

Okay, what else can I do with them?

What else can I do for them?

What else can I teach them?

You know, they're sponges now. I want to be able to pour everything into them. And then I go work with high schoolers and I come back home and it's like:

Oh my gosh, I need something else.

I have to do something else.

I have to teach them.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

I really hope that my daughter spends more time finding herself and...

I told her to go to a sperm bank, don't bother. (laughs)

TOUGH LOVE:

Yes, it makes you grow.

Yes, it makes you adapt.

Yes, you become this bigger person.

Yes, you understand that the love that you have for your child is incomparable.

There isn't anything that you can talk about in that vein where you *know*, absolutely that you would give your life for that child and I don't think any of us will say that lightly.

We will do it and we will do it in a heartbeat and that's not a love that you're aware of before you have a child.

I think that any one of us that has had a child who wanted the child and brought that into our lives, we would without a second hesitation say that we would lay our lives down for our children. So maybe that's the piece as well. It's like, *wow*, you know, where does this come from? Because you don't *have* it before like you love your partner. We don't think about it in terms of like "I would die for you" and I *would* die for my child. I think every one of us would say the same thing. We would die for our children in order to keep them safe.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

Don't get involved with a husband because you know, my experience.

And her experience, she doesn't really have a good relationship with her father. Her father is very much a narcissist.

I'm so happy I have them. I *would* put my life down for them.

looking back

NURTURING:

I don't often reflect on being a mum and take it a little bit for granted because it's such an integral part of my identity, but it is a privilege and it's a wonderful thing. Now that they're adults, I've got two of my absolute best friends in the world. You know, so it does evolve over time and it does change and I'm grateful. Thank you for allowing me to feel that grace and that gratitude.

PASSIONATE:

I always wanted to be a mom. That was one of my dreams and it came true. To sit back and see my 22-year-old now.

And he's a man.

He's making his own decisions and he's done everything I thought, and he's exceeded my expectations and more.

And he's alive.

FLEXIBLE:

There's a big balance I think for women about kind of, you know, different parts of yourself and needing all the parts to be kind of honored and I think a very difficult juggling act amidst marriage, friendship, relationships.

LOVING:

I don't know, maybe I need to speak with someone to show me how to take care of just me. But I feel like taking care of me encloses taking care of the children.

GETTING IT RIGHT:

There are those times where you feel a little guilty but learning how to kind of turn that off to say well, this is for them too, you know. I've got to give to myself to be able to give out.

FAIR:

I was someone who said for decades:

Nothing is ever coming out of my body.”

I'm never having a child.

I don't want a child.

I don't have any holes in my body big enough for a child to come out of, so I'm not doing this.

And then sorta like:

I think I do want to do this.

And then you do it and you're like:

Well, that was hard, and it did hurt, but this was the best decision I've ever made and has made me a better person and shaped differently the way I live my life and the life that I want.

CONSISTENT:

You know, the clouds didn't open up in the sky. All those things didn't happen, But I feel like, I got the best part and I've gotten over it.

That it didn't happen in a flowery way. I got what I was supposed to get.

ACTIVE:

I've been very fortunate very, very fortunate.

We've just been blessed by so many people who have helped us on this journey.

You don't do it alone. Honestly. You don't do it alone. So, for that I'm grateful and I know my kids are grateful.

DEVOTED:

I so appreciate hearing about your lives. A lot of parenting is kind of figuring out how to find that balance. Having a supportive partner and community to help figure that out has been tremendous.

MOTHER WHO TEACHES:

I put off a lot of things in my life to raise kids, So I could go to the programs, go to the parent-teacher conferences, pick them up from school, so I could do all that.

It wasn't what I thought was gonna be, but God in his infinite plan and wisdom, certainly knew what he was doing because all my girls are grown right now and I'm just so grateful for the relationship that we have. We have so much that we can relate on, so much that we can talk about now. And all four of them are just totally, you know, four different women, but we each have such a great relationship.

PROTECTIVE & TOUGH:

My children are not a mistake, but I married well beneath me.

I should have taken a look at what I was getting into, and I didn't.

So that is why I will never get involved with another person again.

I will be happy by myself.

I *am* happy by myself.

PROUD:

Being a mom is the hardest job in the world. It's so hard. How much you sacrifice...
Not sacrifice?

But what's the best way to do it?

There is no best way.

It's whatever works for you and your situation and your family.

It took me a really long time to really know that I'm like a really good mom.

I've gotten better with age, everybody's gotten better with age.

I used to not be very affectionate and now I feel like I'm just like a big ball of mush.

And I *gush* over, *gush* over my kids.

I am so proud of them.

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