



MEGAN ALRUTZ

DIGITAL STORYTELLING, APPLIED THEATRE, & YOUTH

PERFORMING POSSIBILITY

ROUTLEDGE



Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth

Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth argues that theatre artists must reimagine how and why they facilitate performance practices with young people. Rapid globalization and advances in media and technology continue to change the ways that people engage with and understand the world around them. Drawing on pedagogical, aesthetic, and theoretical threads of applied theatre and media practices, this book presents practitioners, scholars, and educators with innovative approaches to devising and performing digital stories.

This book offers the first comprehensive examination of digital storytelling as an applied theatre practice. Alrutz explores how participatory and mediated performance practices can engage the wisdom and experience of youth; build knowledge about self, others, and society; and invite dialogue and deliberation with audiences. In doing so, she theorizes digital storytelling as a site of possibility for critical and relational practices, feminist performance pedagogies, and alliance building with young people.

This page intentionally left blank

Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth Performing Possibility

Megan Alrutz

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2015 Megan Alrutz

The right of Megan Alrutz to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-415-83218-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-83219-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-50060-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Taylor & Francis Books

To Daniel and Grace, who make my everything possible

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis	1
<i>Power on the line: personal narratives move people</i>	1
<i>Generative intersections: digital storytelling and applied theatre</i>	3
<i>Digital storytelling: a brief overview</i>	5
<i>Applied drama and theatre: a brief overview</i>	6
<i>Untapped potential: integrating applied theatre and digital storytelling</i>	7
<i>Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis</i>	12
<i>Mediated representations: benefits of an integrated praxis</i>	14
<i>Attending to youth stories: preparation, production, and presentation</i>	15
2 Engaging the wisdom and experience of youth	21
<i>Taking youth creative practices seriously</i>	23
<i>Critically engaged pedagogy and practice</i>	26
<i>Digital U: Parramore Kidz Zone Program Pitch</i>	30
<i>Intentional communities of practice</i>	33
<i>Embedded practices/rituals</i>	35
<i>Overarching devising process: We Come from Parramore</i>	35
<i>Poetic devising and agentive selves</i>	38
<i>Poetic devising framework: We Come from Parramore</i>	40
3 Building knowledge about self, others, and society	54
<i>Social and relational practices</i>	55
<i>Stories as knowledge and perspective</i>	58
<i>Not a Bird or a Plane</i>	59
<i>Devising frameworks: producing individual digital stories</i>	61

<i>Making meaning about self, others, and society</i>	71
<i>Double Diamond design process model</i>	75
<i>Possibilities for knowledge and belonging</i>	78
<i>Toward new knowledge</i>	80
4 Inviting dialogue and deliberation with audiences	85
<i>Something is happening here</i>	85
<i>Affective engagements</i>	88
<i>Dramaturgy of audience participation: frameworks for dialogue and deliberation</i>	89
<i>Extending alliances with invited audiences</i>	105
5 Performing possibility	110
<i>“Are you part of a movement?”</i>	110
<i>Toward coalitional consciousness</i>	111
<i>Politics of performance</i>	112
<i>The promise of possibility</i>	113
<i>Appendix A Online resources categorized by topic</i>	116
<i>Appendix B Select glossary of terms</i>	134
<i>Appendix C Select theatre, media, and storytelling activities</i>	137
<i>Index</i>	149

Figures and Tables

Figures

3.1	A Process for Building New Knowledge	63
3.2	Double Diamond Design Process Model	75

Tables

1.1	Overview of Digital Storytelling and Applied Theatre	8
2.1	Descriptive Storyboard: <i>We Come From Parramore</i>	46
3.1	Descriptive Storyboard: <i>Not a Bird or a Plane</i>	66
3.2	Making Meaning Around Self, Others, and Society	72
4.1	Sequence-based Frames in TIE	92
4.2	Experiential or Action Frames in TIE	92
4.3	Sequence-based Frames in Digital Storytelling as an Applied Theatre Practice	94
4.4	Experiential or Action Frames in Digital Storytelling as an Applied Theatre Practice	95

Acknowledgements

This book is inspired by my collaborations with many young people, teaching artists, scholars, community members, friends, and mentors. Among them, I am most grateful to Stephani Etheridge Woodson, who took a risk and invited a young practitioner into a world of digital technology, devising, and critically engaged dramaturgy, and Roger Bedard, who challenged me to trust my instincts and keep writing. Heartfelt thanks to Priscilla, Gus, Tiffany, Manny, Autumn, and all of the young people who shared their stories, hid my shoes, and took leaps of faith as I was getting started. I continue to learn from the questions, experiences, and wisdom you brought to our collaborations, as well as your invitation to reimagine what it means to be a youth-ally. Thanks also to my collaborators and colleagues at the University of Central Florida—Traci Reitz, Vandy Wood, Sybil St. Claire, and Paul Lartinoix—for encouraging my dream projects and nurturing a space for young people to explore digital storytelling and theatre.

More recently, my research for this project was well supported by the University of Texas at Austin and other Austin-based collaborators. Many thanks to Dean Dempster at the College of Fine Arts for supporting critical research leaves and funding the research necessary for completing this book. The Foxworth Centennial Fellowship and the Grace Hill Milam Centennial Fellowship offered much needed space for moving through this project, and I am thankful for the foresight, support, and recognition of these family foundations. I am equally grateful for the support from my colleagues in Drama & Theatre for Youth & Communities who continue to encourage my larger trajectory of work as an artist-scholar. Katie Dawson, Coleman Jennings, Joan Lazarus, Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, and Suzan Zeder—thank you for making the time and space for me to explore, research, dream, direct, and write. To my department mentor, Susan Mickey, I appreciate your support and advocacy at every turn. Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, Charlotte Canning, and Brant Pope have directly supported my work on this manuscript and continue to encourage my efforts to integrate theory and practice. I thank Kris Andrews and the Center for Educator Development; Amy Guadagnoli, Judy Jennings, and Resources for Learning; Tameika, Hannah, Benjamin, Lui, and Oliver. Each of these individuals and organizations provided me with critical opportunities and

encouragement to experiment with digital technologies and performance with young people.

The ideas in this book are also influenced by my collaborations with past and present graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Central Florida, as well as with many youths across the country. Sincere thanks to Alicia Fuss, Amanda Kibler, Amanda Morris, Amie Kising, Cicely Bosley, Karen Weberman, Lucy Bryson, Meghann Henry, Meredith Hoppe, Nick Bazo, Katie Eckert, Rebecca Podsednik, Shelli Kinsley, Jennifer Adams, Rozz Grigsby, and many others—for experimenting with me, challenging me, and reminding me that artistry can and should be a relational practice. Anne McNamee, Michelle Dahlenburg, Meg Greene, Noah Martin, and Tallerie McRae—your work in digital and applied performance practices continues to deepen my thinking about the possibilities of this work with young people. Elizabeth Brendel Horn and Emily Freeman, I especially appreciate your research assistance on this book and your constant willingness to engage with me around the social, political, and practical underpinnings of applied theatre. Thank you all of my students for taking this journey with me.

I am also indebted to an amazing circle of women and men who continue to help me imagine feminist and anti-racist performance work with young people. To Kristen Hogan, my writing sister and friend, your wisdom, encouragement, and patience have been invaluable in my writing process and my life in general. Thank you for your endless readings, discussions, and feminist tables; you challenge me to see the world anew on a daily basis and to think deeply about arts as activism. Julia Listengarten, Amanda Hashagen, Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, Amy Jensen, and Lynn Hoare, I am deeply grateful for your willingness to read my raw materials and pose critical questions with a great deal of love. Your honest insights and your generous friendships make me a better scholar, teacher, and practitioner. Thanks also to Matt Richardson, Wura Ogunji, and Fiona Macbeth and Rebecca Rosser—our work together has seeped into these pages.

To my editors and readers on this project, I am grateful for your keen insights and constant encouragement. Ben Piggott and Harriet Affleck—thank you for championing this project. Your feedback was invaluable in places of struggle and delight, and you reminded me that meaningful projects require patience and time. To the four readers on this project—your feedback is also manifested in these pages. Thank you for providing me with critical maps and places for clarity, as well as bringing such a generous spirit to your reading of my work.

The cover photo for this book was generously provided by photographer Ethan Busse, a student of Youth in Focus (2013). Many thanks to Ethan and Youth in Focus, a nationally recognized youth development photography program, whose mission is to empower urban youth, through photography, to experience their world in new ways and to make positive choices for their lives (www.youthinfocus.org). Some of the ideas and stories in this book were first explored in articles that I published in *Teaching Artist Journal* (2006) and

Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance (2013). While the writing has been cited, revised, and/or expanded for this project, I would like to express my gratitude to *TAJ* and *RIDE*; the respective editors and reviewers of each journal undoubtedly shaped my current perspectives and writing about digital storytelling and applied theatre.

Finally, much love and gratitude to my family and friends, who continue to support my life and work in academia and theatre. This career is not always forgiving of everyday commitments and connections, and I thank you for your understanding and graciousness in my long and many absences. Daniel, Grace, Mom and Peter, Dad, Emily and Brian, Michael, Claire, Sean and Emily, Etta and Aubrey, Alyssa and Tad, Grandma and Grandpa, Shannon and Ricky, Carmen, Rick, Sonny, Maggie, Joaquin, and Davy and Marisol, please know that you helped bring this book to fruition. I feel your support, love, and encouragement always, but especially over the last several years.

Preface

Toward the end of writing this book, I experienced a pretty profound moment of seeing myself in and through someone else's digital story. My dad emailed me a link to a trailer for a documentary called *American Commune*. The trailer features two grown sisters, now documentarians, revisiting their childhood on one of the largest intentional living communities in the United States, called The Farm. The sisters left The Farm around the same time my own family did, and the trailer suggests that the transition was fraught with complications, tensions, and questions around their non-traditional upbringing and the unrealized ideals put forth by the community. As adults, the sisters travel back to The Farm and explore the "rise and fall of America's largest utopian social experiment" (*American Commune*), all through the frame of their deeply personal life stories or relationships to this place.

In truth, this digital story surprised me. Or maybe my reaction to it surprised me. I was filled with memories, associations, and stories from my own life—growing up on The Farm and later struggling as a young child to integrate into public school and many other aspects and expectations of US society I encountered when my family reintegrated into mainstream society. I watched the trailer multiple times and experienced moments of delight, grief, disbelief, and finally understanding. The sisters sounded and in some ways looked like me. Their vocabulary included what I call "hippy talk," and their childhood photos showed awkward girls in bare feet and tie-dyed T-shirts. Their experiences felt familiar and their journey reminded me of my own. I did not know these sisters, and yet in some ways I felt I knew them well. Seeing this story, hearing the very words the sisters used to describe their childhood, and thinking about their perspectives helped me see how and why I move through the world in my particular way. Their story made me think about my relationship to people, power, and authority, and ultimately why I continue to pursue applied theatre and digital storytelling with young people.

I grew up within a significant movement toward a self-sustainable, vegan lifestyle and a non-traditional paradigm for living and working in community. From a very young age, I was surrounded with stories, experiences, and narratives about community responsibility and social justice. I lived closely with thousands of people who moved to rural Tennessee to work the land and create

a non-violent, non-commercial, and environmentally and spiritually responsible society. Residents took a lifelong vow of poverty, sharing simple housing and self-grown food, and rejecting makeup, jewelry, and other forms of material wealth and vanity. Growing up in this setting, I learned that I was responsible for creating a more just planet, that all people deserved respect and freedom from violence, and that I was part of something larger than myself.

I was also immersed in communal living. We lived with several families in a single home with no hot running water or indoor toilets. Food was rationed to each household and everyone pitched in to cook, clean, and care for the kids. Although the commune aimed to employ people's passions and skills, in some ways, little room existed for individualism and it was frowned upon to *get into the juice*, which meant doing anything that might be perceived as complaining or taking focus from the group. Watching the trailer for *American Commune*, I became hyper aware of how these life experiences now align with and push against my current politics. My personal narratives about social change and political responsibility sometimes collide with my desire to keep the peace and to avoid *getting into the juice*. My history—including my family and community narratives—manifest daily in my efforts to live and work as a social justice ally. They also explicitly shape my own messy relationship to relational and justice-oriented performance practices with young people.

This book grows out of my life experiences, stories, and research. But, at its core, this book and its ideas are inspired by my collaborations with smart, brave, and creative young people. Youths on the Gila River Indian Community in Bapchule, AZ, taught me that media and technology can sometimes prove more accessible than live performance and that young people need to tell stories on their own terms. A group of young women in Orlando, FL, showed me the importance of sharing stories within a community of practice, and not simply for an audience. A group of LGBTQ youth in Austin, TX, reminded me that if and when we fail to address the politics of narrative, our silence signals complicity. I am grateful to each of them—for their stories and for their willingness to engage with me in this life work and passion. Each of these young people helps me know and understand that listening to, imagining, and telling stories creates possibilities—for seeing ourselves, each other, and a more just society.

References

American Commune *Synopsis*, <<http://www.americancommunemovie.com/film-synopsis/>> (accessed July 21, 2013).

1 Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis

Power on the line: personal narratives move people

Possibility: a future prospect or potential.

Several years ago, I answered my office phone to a concerned citizen yelling at me. “How dare you!” she said. “I can’t believe that you have the nerve to spend my tax dollars on theatre and media programs for those kids—those kids whose parents are prostitutes and liars and drug addicts. Why should *they* get special treatment—special arts programs? There are a lot of other kids, good kids, that deserve that platform.” In part, the caller made a solid point—lots of other kids do deserve that platform. Applied theatre and digital media programs can and should offer many communities of youth opportunities to participate in socially valuable arts practices.

My anonymous caller, uninterested in a dialogue, eventually hung up on me. Although listening to her monologue proved challenging, her narrative pushed me to revisit how and why performing one’s personal story matters. To tell your story for a public audience, to share your (perhaps marginalized, new, unpopular, or uncomfortable) narrative, can have the potential to affect how each of us, the teller and the collective “us,” sees the past, participates in the present, and imagines the future. Performance asserts the value of individuals and their experiences. Moreover, performance can constitute both the making and the disruption of systems of power.

The youth referred to by my caller were involved in Digital U, a community-based digital storytelling program that I co-directed out of the University of Central Florida with media artist Traci Reitz. Over the course of three years, we employed applied theatre and digital media forms to engage youth participants in creating digital stories—or short, personally narrated movies and digital performance collages about and relevant to their lives. The process and the products of this embodied and technologically mediated performance program intentionally worked to disrupt hegemonic narratives about youth identity. As with my call, every so often, the politics of applied theatre can become amplified in public discourse. The tensions around the foregrounding of marginalized youth voices made me reflect more fully on the value of critical representational practices and on the complex relationships between youth, media, performance, and power.

2 *Digital storytelling as an applied theatre praxis*

Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth: Performing Possibility grows out of these and other recent reflections, and more specifically from my desire to query digital storytelling and applied theatre as sites of possibility for valuing the experiences and wisdom of young people.¹

My research as an artist-scholar over the last twelve-plus years has focused on critical pedagogy and issues of responsible representation in applied theatre, digital storytelling, arts integration, and theatre for young audiences. This book builds on and extends my previous work to include critical considerations of technologies of engagement in applied theatre settings, specifically as tools for performing identity, enacting social change, and addressing identity-based inequities. Moreover, it draws on my research and practice as a director of various applied theatre and digital media programs in school and community-based settings, as well as on my work as a graduate student at Arizona State University (Tempe, AZ), where my studies in theatre for youth deepened my exposure to embodied, engaged, and critical performance pedagogies and practices.

While at Arizona State University, I worked as the resident teaching artist for two years in a community-based digital storytelling and performance residency program called Place: Vision & Voice (PVV). I collaborated with the program director Stephani Etheridge Woodson to facilitate digital storytelling performance programs foregrounding the thoughts and experiences of youth participants within their schools, communities, and society at large. I began exploring the relationships between photography, video, and performance, and I experimented with embodied and media-based approaches to engaging youth and devising stories. The program worked toward public showings of students' work and often framed significant community conversations about the topics raised in the digital stories themselves. While the youths in PVV created and reflected on their own mediated—or digitally rendered—representations, we placed little emphasis on technical proficiency with digital editing, and the students relied on us to physically put all of the pieces together into a final product. Working from students' loosely constructed storyboards and responding to their feedback on the digitally documented products, I learned to edit their digital assets (voiceovers, music, photographs, and digital video) into completed digital stories. This process of negotiation and performance-making with youths gave me insight into how personal agency, or the ability to represent self or enact change, can increase with technical proficiency in digital media production.

Years later, as a faculty member at the University of Central Florida, I co-developed Digital U, a program that housed several long-term digital storytelling and applied theatre initiatives focused on creative approaches to integrating technology, arts, and education. Drawing on my experience with critical drama-based pedagogy and digital storytelling, the Digital U initiatives worked to foster a supportive community in which young people could practice self-expression and community advocacy. I continued to explore the possibility of a program model that supported the youth agency that can come with technical savvy and also built visual literacy and community-engagement skills among the participants. Although we emphasized the technical skills needed to create