

1998

Creating a textual performance piece

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Recommended Citation

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Senior Thesis Project: Creating a Textual Performance Piece

Karen Pitcher

Introduction: Spring 1998

When posed with the challenge of creating a senior thesis project, I was boggled as to what to do. As an English major, I knew my options were very open, and I was determined to make this project one that I would enjoy throughout my senior year. In order to do so, I had to broaden my scope to include not only an element of my major, but also components of my communications minor and my first major, theatre. In order to do this, I turned to oral interpretation, an activity that involves dramatic interpretation of texts written by others. In this format, I knew I would be able to combine all three elements of interest to create a project that would be enlightening and enjoyable for all involved.

Once I had decided on the format of my project, I immediately turned to Dr. Karen Mitchell, an assistant professor in the department of communication studies. She had been my professor during my sophomore year when I was a student in her Oral Interpretations course. We met a couple of different times to discuss the possibilities for my performance. Immediately we decided that the piece should be something I do alone rather than with a large cast; after all, it was *my* thesis to present, plus working alone would be easier for me to do during a busy senior year. Together, we decided that my piece should focus on a real personality rather than a fictional character, and after a session we narrowed my candidates down to Janis Joplin and Virginia Woolf. Both people were intriguing to me; I loved Joplin's music of the 1960s and found her biography to be as interesting as her lyrics, while Woolf had always been a mysterious figure in English literature. I began to take a closer look at the woman that I would have to become in my performance. After a while, I decided that it would be more beneficial for me to

examine the work and words of Virginia Woolf, not only because I enjoyed learning about her fascinating life, but also because the study of her work would be beneficial in my future English literature studies. So, upon deciding on Woolf, I immediately enrolled in Dr. Barbara Lounsberry's *Seminar in Literature: Virginia Woolf* for Fall Semester 1998.

Fall 1998

My only real exposure to Woolf's work had been a snippet of her writing that was discussed in my Major British Writers course one year before. In my anthology, I had read a few pages of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and fell in love with the text. One section in particular stood out in my head for the rest of the semester: Woolf's pondering of what would have happened if Shakespeare had had a sister of equal poetic and literary talent. In this section, Woolf concludes that if Shakespeare had a sister of the same or even greater talent, there is still no way she could have written great plays during that time period. Even if she were to break away from an arranged marriage and make her way to London to promote her work, her social position as a woman would not allow her plays to be produced or for her to act onstage. Woolf takes the reader through this imaginary story and claims at the end that Shakespeare's sister would have killed herself due to the "nervous stress and dilemma" that this oppression would have caused. For the majority of the rest of the essay, Woolf discusses how women's voices do need to be heard, and how women need to find incomes and rooms of their own in order to write great works of art. I had so enjoyed this excerpt and couldn't wait to begin reading other Woolf works in my class.

In my literature seminar on Virginia Woolf in Fall 1998, I was able to take an in-depth look at Woolf's life and work. The first few weeks of class, Dr. Lounsberry focused her lectures on the amazing life of Virginia Woolf. We learned all about her family lineage, the great literary

achievements of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the sudden loss of her mother, Julia, and other effects this large and artistic family had on young Virginia. We also learned much about the infamous “Bloomsbury group” created by Virginia and her sister Vanessa, and how this group of artists and writers affected Woolf’s life. Dr. Lounsberry also discussed Woolf’s problem with mental illness, which entailed periods of paralyzing depression that eventually led to her suicide in 1941. To me, Woolf’s life seemed better than fiction, and I began to consider basing my performance piece around this fascinating and brilliant life.

In the class, I read a Woolf memoir and found it delightful, but then we moved right into her fiction. I struggled through some of the Woolf novels and was relieved to finally read the nonfiction essay *A Room of One’s Own*. I found the book to be simply fascinating and very insightful for the time period in which it was written. Woolf was basically deconstructing the history of women, asking her readers to search for the “herstory” within history. According to Dr. Lounsberry, this work was one that became sort of a benchmark for feminist literature, and for academic women’s studies programs. Later in the semester, we also read the extended essay *Three Guineas*, in which Woolf also urges for the equal education and rights for women. Both of these works were very inspiring and meaningful to me, and found that I was more intrigued by Woolf’s social critiques such as these, rather than her fiction work.

Towards the end of the semester, I went in to discuss my performance piece with Dr. Lounsberry. At first, we discussed the number of different ways I could present Virginia Woolf’s personal life on stage. I could take the perspective of her life as a writer, as a social activist, as a genius dealing with bi-polar disorder and manic depression, or as a woman who broke the sexual barriers of her time. All aspects were fascinating to me, and I wanted to expose my audience to them all. However, the more I talked with Dr. Lounsberry, the more I realized

that I could not possibly try to compress such a dazzling yet complicated life into a thirty minute time-span, or even an hour-long performance. I felt that by doing so, I would be cheating my audience and cheating her biography. I told Dr. Lounsberry that really, I wanted to show introduce my audience to Woolf's ideas and contribution to the rights of women. We then concluded that by taking out portions of *Room* and *Three Guineas* and piecing them together, I could educate my audience about Woolf, while at the same time paying tribute to her contributions to society. With this in mind, I was able to use my winter break to re-read these pieces and begin noting what sections would work in a performance setting.

Spring 1999

Early in the spring semester, I began to meet weekly with my script/performance advisor, Dr. Karen Mitchell. Our first few meetings were generally for logistics, such as when rehearsals and the performance would be, as well as for establishing deadlines for the finished script, memorized lines, and technical run-throughs. Karen also gave me an idea of how long the piece should be, as well as limitations of the set. Once some of the logistics were covered, it was time for me to begin scripting.

After re-reading *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* over winter break, I had come back to campus ready to begin scripting. This process was one that took longer than I had anticipated, mostly because I couldn't find many large sections of text that I wanted to use. In both pieces I would find specific paragraphs and even specific lines that I wanted to include, but somehow they would have to be put together. Also, I began to realize that the two pieces were written in different styles. *Room* was written in the form of a speech, in first person singular, while *Three Guineas* was written as a letter that shifted in tense. Jumping from a line in *Room* to

a line from *Three Guineas* could not work because of the awkward sound. I then realized that I would have to choose only one of the pieces to use as the text for my performance.

Because of this problem, I was forced to take a closer look at the two texts. Though I really loved some of Woolf's ideas in *Three Guineas*, it didn't take me long to realize that my performance material would have to come from *A Room of One's Own*. In *Room*, Woolf's ideas are presented in more concrete ways, as they are generally told in story format. *Three Guineas* is a brilliant piece, but one that is better served to readers or to an audience that enjoys theory and critical thinking. I knew I wanted my piece to be one that anyone could understand, I narrowed my text down to one. Therefore, I decided that I would definitely use *A Room of One's Own* for my piece, and that I would probably use my favorite sections from it. Now it was just a matter of narrowing down my favorite sections into a cohesive script.

Though Woolf explores many interesting issues in *Room*, including the necessity of an androgynous mind for the creation of works of art, I chose to narrow my focus primarily on the Shakespeare's sister section and related material. I felt that this was necessary because obviously the piece was too long to do in its entirety, but also because I felt these sections would be the easiest for the audience to understand, and could perhaps be the most interesting when acted onstage. Woolf's writing tends to be very dense and often theoretical, so the Shakespeare's sister section and related material seemed to be the best choice on the matter. After all, it was this section that first tuned me into Virginia Woolf's writing, and I had a strong desire to spark interest in the members of my audience as well.

Once this was decided, I simply began going through the book and highlighting those sections I wanted to include in the piece. From there, I would take these various lines and type them out on computer, print them out, and then literally cut them apart by section. Putting

together a script in this way is much like putting a jigsaw puzzle together, as the lines must make a smooth transition from one to another. My main focus was to create a script that flowed easily from one idea to another while at the same fully explained Woolf's ideas in an understandable tone. I also had to have a definite beginning and ending that made sense with the piece. Needless to say, the first jigsaw script I created needed many major overhauls and a few minor facelifts.

It took about three drafts to compile all the sections that I wanted to include in my piece. However, I had problems trying to transition the ideas, so I turned to Karen's expertise in performance texts. With her help, we were able to painstakingly go through the book and find key lines and paragraphs that linked some of my major sections that also fit with my introductory/concluding material. Together we put together a pretty solid script that was approximately 30 minutes long in the initial read-throughs.

Once the script was complete (for the time being), I could begin rehearsing and think more about other aspects of my performance. For a while, I considered playing with the time setting of my performance, and doing a sort of post-modern Virginia Woolf, dressed in all black with very abstract furniture. After all, I felt that the messages in the texts were timeless. However, the more I read through the material, I concluded that it must be kept in the time period; too many sections were directly addressing an audience of the 1920s, and some lines would become obsolete if I were to set the show in the present or future.

From there, I was able to meet with my technical director, Brad Carlson, about possibilities for a set and for lighting. Because I was now doing *Room* in the period in which it was written, I knew I wanted to have a set that looked similar to a library or study room. We created a list of things I needed, such as a desk, a wingback chair and table, and a bookshelf. I

also decided that I would like to actually start the performance as if I were giving a speech, considering the text was first presented in that form. Therefore, Brad and I added a podium/lectern to our furniture list as well. Finally, we discussed the kind of lighting needed for my set. I concluded that special lights would be needed to set off the podium so it would imply another setting, and decided on soft yellow lights on my room, in order to give it an antiqued look.

It was about at this stage of development that I began to memorize my lines. This aspect is painstaking, yet I was pleased to find that my ability to memorize lines quickly had not been lost completely. Each night I would sit down and memorize a couple of paragraphs of the script. First I would read the text aloud several times, then repeat each individual line over again until I had it down. Over a span of about two weeks, I was able to memorize the entire script. However, because of my set, I knew I would have a couple of portions of the script out on stage for me.

During this time, I would plot out my blocking at my house. I made up a small diagram of the set and where I would place all the furniture. Then I would mime it in my bedroom. Overall, I knew the piece was working, but as I got the script memorized, I had to make a few changes. Some of the text was too repetitive, theoretical, and confusing once moved from the written to spoken format. So I ended up cutting a couple of paragraphs and several individual lines. Also, I began to think that thirty minutes of just me talking would be boring for my audience. I decided that I would attempt to find some actors that could mime the Shakespeare's sister section for me. That way the audience would have some additional visuals to bring the story to life.

Adding the actors meant additional work, such as adding additional lighting and getting other costumes. I had borrowed a dress, hat, and gloves for myself from Theatre UNI, but now I had to go back and find two sixteenth-century outfits. Fortunately, everything I found fit on the first try. I kept in contact with the actors and decided to have them come to rehearsals starting about a week before the performance.

By this point, spring break was approaching and so was the show. I had the script memorized, my actors lined up, my costumes in hand, my set pieces arriving, my lighting design figured out. The main task left for me was to create a program. I wanted to be sure to indicate that this was my Presidential Scholar's senior project, and also acknowledge all the people that helped me. A program gave me the opportunity to do so. I also decided to add two paragraphs of notes in the program that further described both Woolf and the *Room* text. That way, anyone who was not familiar with either would at least have some information about the performance.

Final Rehearsal Week

I returned to campus after spring break, ready to rehearse in the performance space. Fortunately, the space was open for me every night so I had no lack of rehearsal time. During my first few rehearsals, I had to work on adjusting my voice to fit the performance room, because I had usually rehearsed in smaller spaces. Also, I finally had some of my set furniture, I had to start working around that. I began to take note of when to stand up or sit down, or which way I would move around the table, etc. All of my initial blocking became more and more specific with the furniture in place.

It was also during this time that I had Nikki and Aaron, my actors, come to rehearsal. We worked for about an hour on the blocking of their movements. Because I was going to have them more in shadow than in light, we made some deliberate movements that would portray

certain things to the audience. For example, with the line “He hinted—you can imagine what,” Nikki and Aaron decided to have Aaron reach out and touch Nikki’s hair, to resemble flirting. We also worked out a fight scene to make it look believable yet not painful for Nikki!

Finally, I did a full run-through with Karen four days before my performance. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Karen had few problems with my piece. Generally, she suggested being a bit more angry or bitter behind the professional demeanor of the script. I agreed that I was coming across as too coy and cutesy in some parts. Woolf’s text is generally serious stuff, and I wanted to be sure the audience realized that this piece was not meant to be taken lightly. She meant what she wrote.

During my last few days of rehearsal, I found myself feeling a bit bored and lonely. Once I realized that I really did know my lines and my blocking, I got a bit tired of running the performance. Talking for 25 minutes straight can be difficult to do if you practice too much. So by the third day before my performance, I began just to run the speech once a day to save my voice and energy. Also, I was beginning to get lonely practicing by myself for hours at a time. As a theatre person, I am used to rehearsing with other people. Generally, it is good to have other cast members on stage with you (for cues!) or other cast members in the audience to give feedback. Though Aaron and Nikki did watch and give me some advice at times, I was usually on my own. While I liked the control that I had working alone, I realized through this project that I enjoy the community aspect of theatre.

The Performance

About two and a half months after my initial idea, I was ready to perform. My performance was held on Sunday, March 28, 1999 in CAC 108. Originally, I had planned to have a public performance, and advertise my show across campus. However, because of the day

of week, the dense subject matter, and my slight nervousness, I decided to just invite those people I felt would enjoy the piece. I told many of my friends as well as some of my English professors and English classes. This made me much more comfortable and also gave me a better indication of who would be in my audience.

On the day of the performance, I never actually practiced. I came to space about an hour and a half early to run a couple of sections. But most of my time was spent placing my props in their appropriate places and setting the stage. I also took some time to really warm up my body and voice, something I did not do enough of during my rehearsals. About a half an hour before curtain, I got into costume, did one last props check, and waited. I was nervous that one of my actors had not arrived, and for a while was scrambling to decide what should be done if she did not show up. But once she came, I was able to calm down. Once the doors were open, I sat offstage, getting into character while at the same time listening to familiar voices in the audience.

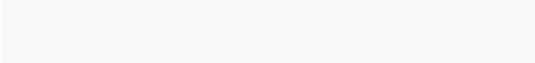
After what seemed like an eternity, I watched the house lights go down, and my lone light over the podium go up. I slowly approached the lectern and took a deep breath. It was so strange to have bodies in the chairs I had practiced in front of for so long. Yet the lights were just bright enough that I couldn't see individual faces, which was to my benefit. There was this brief moment where I thought I might laugh! Fortunately, I began the speech with no problems. Once I got started, I completely relaxed and enjoyed my time under the lights.

Overall, the entire performance moved so quickly. I was pleased in that I only flubbed one line--actually, I simply added a line that was not originally in the script. But it did not make any difference. I flew through the script with fluency that I did not have before. By the time I had reached the end, I truly felt moved by what I was saying. For the first time, I felt truly affected by my text. I believe so strongly what Woolf says about women and their unused

potential. For some reason, there was a moment towards the end that almost brought tears to my eyes. Perhaps it was the moving text combined with the fact that all of my hard work was now coming to an end.

Generally, I feel that the audience really enjoyed the performance, not only because of their positive comments afterwards, but because of their absolute silence during the show. I don't think I heard one cough or movement throughout the whole thing. Though many people found it fun to watch me act, I was pleased to know that some really found Woolf's ideas to be interesting. My roommate, an accounting major, told me, "Your show makes me want to read Virginia Woolf." Another friend, a freshman Scholar, said, "I had never thought about how women are portrayed in books in comparison to how they are treated in real life. I was so moved at that part." Though it is always nice to hear positive comments about your acting ability, it was these comments that meant the most to me. It was my hope that my piece would bring Woolf's ideas to life, and spark interest in those that have never read or even *heard* of her. I feel I have accomplished this goal, judging from the responses of several audience members.

On the whole, I thoroughly enjoyed doing this project. It reminded me how much I enjoy acting, and how much I enjoy the whole process of putting a performance together. The fact that I used an important text also contributed to my enthusiasm, as I saw my project as sort of a teaching tool for others. I would definitely like to continue work in the performance studies area, and perhaps may continue my work later in a graduate program. I am so thankful for all the support I have received from Dr. Karen Mitchell, Dr. Lounsberry, UNI Interpreter's Theatre, and from the Scholar's Board. This project gave me the opportunity to renew my love of creating, interpreting and performing.

Signatures:

Dr. Karen Mitchell, Associate Professor of Communication Studies



Tim Lindquist, Chair—Presidential Scholars Board