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psychiatry in theatre

Under my grandmother's scarf: the healing effects of performance art

Caroline Giroux 



C.G. in her role of the Bosnian woman from 'My Vagina Was My Village', wearing her grandmother's scarf. © The Author (C.G.), 2020.

Many times, I felt I couldn't do it, craving outsiders' affirmation for living in this parallel, alienating reality. My head still dizzy from the traumatic stories heard during the day, I was often depleted during rehearsals. But I persisted. After becoming a receptacle for the idea, deep down I knew I also had to become my patients' voice, and my words, vehicles for their suffering.

For weeks, I tackled the fragmented aspects of the monologue I was performing, 'My Vagina Was My Village', certain lines not flowing naturally, as if my established persona resisted unusual word juxtapositions or pure dissociation. Then, I started visualising what it must have been like to be her, this Bosnian woman who was repeatedly raped during the war. This woman who lost the poetry her vagina created through this monologue. This woman who was now unrooted.

Open-minded, soul naked, my lips unpacked every word. I befriended my foreign accent by slowing down; reciting with total attention is a blessing. By grieving my ideal self, my impostor syndrome dissolved. I embraced the mere statement that came from acting for this event, regardless of the outcome. Little by little, the image of this woman became clearer. Avid for synchronicities, I drew parallels between the symbolism of the script and some wounds of my past. I fantasised about what she would be wearing now: black dress and worn-out flat shoes, with some attention to details to enhance her dignity. I extrapolated my own #MeToo moments to imagine enduring rape as warfare. I held all my patients and their histories of surviving sexual violation inside me as I walked up slowly on stage, following the nostalgic melody of Delerue's piano, my grandmother's scarf over my head, her perfume still gently floating above my hair. Then a miracle occurred: the lost dream of my baby daughter and all the strong women and girls of the world who have been silenced for too long decided to speak through me, as I experienced all the innocence and joy broken by rage, shame and despair.

Applause, acclamation and silent tears were gifts from the spectators and my crew behind the scenes. And I had wings: connected, I felt transformed and capable. This journey demonstrated once again that disapproval seeping through lukewarm support is usually a confirmation that we are doing the right thing. It re-emphasised the value of working with kindred souls who share the same beliefs and know that together we can create a synergy that infuses more peace and compassion around us. And in front of a riveted crowd, as I allowed myself to inhabit my body and my emotions, I stood whole and hopeful.

Performance art can be a unique opportunity to educate society, bear witness to suffering and empower survivors of trauma, both on stage and in the audience. Above all, I realised that following one's passion is the beginning of recovery. When artistic expression is at the service of social justice, it becomes a bridge to unlimited joy and a momentum for a sense of purpose. And collective healing.

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