

## Performance Festivals as Site for Undergraduate Research

Charles Parrott

My role as director of the KSU Tellers, a storytelling troupe housed in the Department of Theatre & Performance Studies at Kennesaw State University, rests at the intersection between teaching, service, and research. This intersection takes on its most tangible form when I use performance opportunities, like the Patti Pace Performance Festival, to test my theories of performance pedagogy. The Tellers, as they are affectionately known, are focused on creating original solo and ensemble performance projects. We presented a portion of a performance ethnography project at the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival at Georgia Regents University in Augusta, GA. As of this writing, our project is still in process but this essay is an attempt to pause and reflect on the ways festival performances can act as a proving ground for undergraduate research. In what follows I briefly describe our project and outline some of benefits of engaging undergraduate research in a festival setting.

In Fall of 2013 The Tellers and I facilitated a series of storytelling workshops at the Global Village Project, or GVP, a school for refugee girls in Decatur, GA. The students at GVP arrive with varying degrees of English proficiency. Learning foundational elements of Western storytelling, we reasoned, could help the girls develop English literacy skills. Along the way, my students developed and delivered workshop curricula about basic elements of storytelling. This offered The Tellers a safe setting to test their emerging thinking about performance pedagogy. My students also organized their thoughts and memories about teaching through journals and conversation.

This information was brought together to craft a performance about what it feels like to engage cultural others in performance pedagogy, following the impulse of performance ethnography to use performance to express lived ethnographic experience. The Tellers turned their analytical eye on themselves to explore their embodied, emotional, and intellectual reactions to engaging in performance pedagogy with this unique population of students. The script theatri-

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calizes their emotional inner-life. Like Bryant Keith Alexander, we are “interested in memory as intellectual or cognitive activity of recalling experience, not to parallel a specific story in a performative context, but to give voice to experience” (101). Ultimately, the piece works to evoke and examine the anxiety produced by doing pedagogy with cultural others without pretending that anxiety can or should ever be wholly resolved.

We brought a partial version of our performance to the intellectually vibrant setting of the Patti Pace Performance Festival to get feedback from the assembled group of performance scholars. We considered this a middle step between our devising process and eventually presenting the performance at an academic conference. The feedback we received was crucial to our still in-progress project. Some of our impulses, such as using a fragmented narration by many voices to dislocate the anxiety from the individual, were validated as effective. I engaged in a rich conversation about the colonizing effect of English-language education and the ways that we might be complicit in that process. Perhaps most importantly, witnessing other performances together gave my students a shared vocabulary for new methods of staging to consider while their work is still in process. While this feedback was specific to our particular project, I want to address four more general benefits reaped by considering the performance festival setting as a site for undergraduate research.

First, both performance and festival participation help to incentivize the undergraduate research process by making it enjoyable. As Rick Roderick and Linda Dickmeyer rightly remark, “there are many students who need to be ‘sold’ on research” and “students should receive the general message that research is pervasive in their lives and that knowing how to conduct and interpret research will benefit them in their careers” (43). While this is admirable and true, this sentiment does not account for the fact that many students want to do what is enjoyable now not what will be useful in the future. Performance offers pleasure now for students who can recognize it as a “tensively negotiated economy of exchange among performer, audience, and text” that affirms “the performer’s agency in an ethics of performance” (Bell 100). What’s more, the promise of travel and meeting other like-minded students at a festival offers its own pleasure and acts as incentive to motivate undergraduate researchers.

Second, the form of performance has a unique efficacy for expressing research outcomes and festivals offer opportunities to stage those outcomes. Undergraduate research is, by definition, held to a different standard of quality than research conducted by professional academics. The range of acceptable outcomes for written professional research is relative narrow. However, performance is a mode of embodied scholarly expression that offers a wide-range of acceptable outcomes. In particular, performance ethnography capitalizes on the “subjective positionings” of students derived from their “deeply felt lived experiences” (Goodall 133). Talented and hardworking undergraduates are, by my measure, capable of engaging in effective performances because those per-

performances are so closely linked to their experiences. Thus, their undergraduate research is not merely an imitation of “real” research but a legitimate participant in the scholarly conversation.

Third, performance scholars can make undergraduate research at festivals part of their own research agenda. For instance, many colleges and universities offer grants specifically designed to support undergraduate research within the current climate of limited financial resources. This year I applied for and received a large grant, designed to support undergraduate research, which included a summer stipend to develop this ongoing research project and funding to present at a national conference. I believe that my application was successful, in part, because I was able to articulate how we would share our research with a community of scholars in the festival setting who, in turn, would offer us useful feedback. Grant funded projects can eventually turn into “publishable research that obviously provides career benefits to the faculty members involved” (Rodrick and Dickmeyer 43).

Finally, performance festivals offer undergraduate researchers an ad hoc community of other undergraduate scholars where they can immerse themselves in performance. Professional academics have scholarly communities where they can learn about new scholarship, discuss disciplinary standards, and measure their own competence against the work of others. Performance festivals offer student-researchers a temporary but analogous community where they can view and discuss each other’s work. Each year that I attend the Patti Pace Performance Festival with my students our best moments take place at night around the dinner table where we discuss the performances we saw that day. In this way, festivals offer invaluable, informal opportunities for instruction without the built-in pressures of the classroom.

My greatest pleasure lies in working closely with students on performance projects. I suspect that I am not alone in this feeling among my colleagues. Engaging in undergraduate research in the festival setting allows me to work with students while also supporting my own research agenda in way that is mutually beneficial for everyone involved.

## Works Cited

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