

Loving and Longing in Performance: Notes on Storying and Staging

Laura Winton

Love, Longing, Language, Lust: An Erotic Daydream Post 9-11 is comprised of two different sets of journals, one from my week in New York during the September 11th attacks, and the other begun nearly six months later. The two were both written with the self-conscious knowledge that they would be used for performance texts and stories, rather than merely as writing exercises or “personal expression.” However, they were not intentionally written to be included in the *same* performance script. Nonetheless, they were from the beginning, inextricably linked to one another.

I arrived in New York City the night of September 10th, 2001 and went to dinner with some artist friends who were putting me up. The next day, I was intending to go to the World Trade Center and roam around lower Manhattan, a part of town I had missed on my travels the previous year. Having slept late, I was awakened at around 9:00 am by Bob Dombrowski, a poet, visual artist, and sculptor, who came running through my room with a phone in hand saying “two planes just crashed into the World Trade Center.”

After about an hour of stunned television watching, NY1 being the only channel that would come in, I got dressed and took to the streets with a notebook. For the next 3 days, until Thursday, when Port Authority was opened and I was able to leave on a Greyhound, I took in everything I possibly could. I wrote almost nonstop for those

Laura Winton is a doctoral student in the Department of Theatre at the University of Minnesota.

3 days, recording every impression, every conversation, every evacuation I possibly could.

Whereas many people who were in New York on 9/11 may have done more to protect themselves psychically or slowly take in details, I made it a point to take in and absorb every detail that I could. That absorption, alone with the fact that my home was elsewhere and that in the coming months I would not be around to process the week's events with friends and family and neighbors, may have led to my particularly severe post-traumatic stress syndrome. I sat for about 3 months in front of the television watching the clean up efforts.

It's conventional wisdom that one of the ways people deal with trauma is through pleasure and hedonism. And when I decided that I had to get on with my life and find a way to be happy again, I decided to indulge myself in a fling, to lose myself in the headiness of a "crush," all the while realizing that I would get some good writing out of the situation as well.

I am particularly devoted to Dada and Surrealism, to chance and the workings of the unconscious. As such, I rarely write "about" things. Instead, I collect pieces of writing, journals, snippets, etc., periodically trolling through my notebooks looking for images and lines that go together in a kind of "organic" unconscious way, like sculpted sound as I experiment with oral readings. When it works well, the poem or story comes together through consistent and related images rather than a "theme" or an attempt to force meaning on the text.

As I worked my way through my various journals, I found that many of the things I had written in my New York journals were very poetic and I began to think about my own circumstances, the way that the pursuit of the erotic was meant to help deal with my trauma, but also the way in which the trauma was always with me and could never be fully forgotten or jettisoned. A merging or grafting of the two texts onto one another seemed completely natural and I worked rather easily between the two to create this performance text.

At the same time, of course, other issues also come to the fore for all of us when we begin to meet new people and (re)define ourselves for them. To do this after a life-changing redefining moment is almost an overwhelming process. Consequently, there are

3 distinct “movements” to the piece: The first section deals with the initial crush vs. the New York memories. The interlude, “These Words” addresses the intricacies of language and agency; and the third section deals with guilt, shame, and attempting to work through not only the crush, but other relationships that define us. This is the messy, personal stew that became *Love, Longing, Language, Lust*, the most personal text I have ever written or performed.

The symbiosis between writing and performance is very strong for me. As I rehearse and perform this text, I’m always struck by how much it changes in performance. The live version is always being spontaneously revised for rhythm, first and foremost, and often is revised in performance for comfort level (how much of myself am I *really* willing to give away?), for clarity of detail, and even sometimes as memory clarifies or rewrites a moment that I had initially attempted to set down. So even though I think of the piece as being the same as the day I wrote it, in possibly hundreds of small details—a word change here or there or a rearrangement of lines—it is also significantly different.

Of course, the old saw about a live performance is that it is different every time it’s performed. This is particularly so with a solo performance that is as intensely personal as *Love, Longing, Language, Lust*. This is, in fact, the most self-revealing and most personal piece of performance I’ve ever done and the most personal writing I’ve done since my years as a depressed teenage girl, in which everything is confessional and intense. As such, each performance of this work has been completely different in its staging and in the way it reflects what I’m going through in my life at that moment. It has been performed roughly once a year since I wrote it, although never in conjunction with 9/11 or 9/11-related events, although it has twice been performed within a matter of weeks of the anniversary, and so I know that it has often occurred while the event is still “fresh” with the audience.

One thing that has remained the same throughout each performance is that this is a very humiliating piece for me to perform. With each performance, I have been essentially unhappy with some element of it and so it has been the desire to stage it well, to do justice to the text, which has caused me to continue to perform it.

Left to my own devices or had I felt that there had been a rendering of the text that I felt unequivocally good about, I would have stopped then and there, probably after the second performance of it.

The impetus for the piece, besides the obvious desire to write about September 11th and the emotional aftermath, was brutal honesty, to lay myself emotionally bare in light of a world in which we were being encouraged to mistrust one another and to close off from each other. I wanted to counter suspicion with emotional nakedness. Consequently I weave together not only the memories of September 11th, but also my attempts at initiating a new love affair in order to become immersed in pleasure and hedonism, to deal with the relationships involved, the personal history that informs attitudes towards relationships and love and self, and by the interlacing and grafting of texts, to show the mental whirlwind that continually intermixes all of these at the most inconvenient moments.

Performing trauma, sexuality, infidelity, and parental relationships is not an easy thing to do. The first performance of the piece, in late September 2002, was a mere two months after I finished writing it and one month after a literary version of the text was published online in an erotica journal. Both the object of my affection and my partner were in the audience together, as was *his* partner. The performance was incredibly emotionally overdetermined from the outset. I was also struggling with my own body image issues that I have struggled with for years in performance. To be overweight in this culture and then to dare to attempt to be erotic on stage is a very difficult situation. Tackling it for the first time with a performance like this was not easy. But it was part of the performance of courage that I was interested in.

During the first performance, I included “found” video – snippets taken from various TV spots, commercials, 9/11 documentaries, etc. – playing in the background as I performed the text. A voiceover included cut-up and mixed-up versions of the text so that the story was being told in different fragments and a different order than what I was presenting. And among the voiceovers were also recorded orgasms to allow for the eroticism that I might not be able or willing to embody live. There was also some video of me that was taken for the interlude, the “These Words” section that included

both showing the words so I didn't have to speak them, but the audience didn't lose them. This was my attempt to resolve the issues that arise from taking something from page to stage so that elements of both are preserved. And it also included some blindfolding and binding of me that went along with some of the text. I wasn't entirely happy with the video, and much of that would later be cut.

There were three more performances of *Love, Longing, Language, Lust*. In each incarnation, changes were made and more often than not, things were subtracted rather than added. The second performance, in 2004 at an academic conference titled "States of Perversion," was as close to the original as can be had in a tiered lecture room. I wasn't able to have much in the way of props or staging, so it was more like a staged reading. But the original video and all of the voiceovers remained the same.

The third performance was done as part of a festival in Hopkins, Minnesota, part of the Twin Cities area. This time I completely reconceptualized the performance, including my interaction with the technical aspects. Whereas the first piece had been done with a sofa and some sexy lingerie and tights, emphasizing the erotic aspect, this piece was done standing in front of the video projection in a ratty bathrobe, exhausted and disheveled looking, emphasizing the intrusion of memory. Sparked by something I had read by Nao Bustamante in which she has a film projected onto her face, I decided to experiment with this as well. With the first two performances, I had mixed up 9/11 video with other sources including some rather serene looking ripples in water, some Man Ray clips, and other things that captured the movement, pacing or sound of the text or some other emotional resonance. In this third performance, there was only September 11th video. And so projected onto me through the piece in an otherwise dark theatre with no other lighting, I spoke the piece shell shocked as falling buildings and fire trucks played out both inside and outside of my head. I held the remote control in my hands so that I could rewind and fast-forward the clips, the way we replay memories over and over in our heads.

This would have been the final performance for me had there not been some technical snafus. I felt that I had the perfect staging for the piece, but my volunteer technicians failed to remove the pro-

jector's lens cap at the right moment and rather than losing myself in the text and the video, I was distracted by the fact that the audience wasn't seeing what they should be seeing, and trying to find some subtle, non-obvious way to signal them and get the video going. It eventually worked and from what I can tell, the audience didn't seem to notice completely what had happened. But I knew. So my dream of a perfect performance that I could end on and retire the piece had still eluded me.

The final performance came closer than that ill-fated third performance and through a "happy accident" so to speak, came to embody something completely different that seemed to have brought the piece if not maybe full circle, to a completely different point that could only signal the end. I announced this one as the retiring of the piece in all of the publicity and the night of the show. This time, having struggled through previous incarnations of what to do with myself onstage as I performed the piece (which I thought had been resolved with the projection version), I decided to work with a dancer who would improvise movement while I read the piece. This time I worked on text, keeping the script in front of me, which I had never done before, and intentionally emphasizing the literal text of the piece. I noticed in rehearsals that my dancer was reluctant to allow herself to be foregrounded, to take the attention off of me. And so we tried performing the piece with my back to the audience area and I could tell in doing so that she was then empowered to make herself more front and center. So we did a combination staging wherein I was still placed in the middle of the projection, but this time, with my back to the audience. It was a relief for me not to face them with this emotional, humiliating text. And it also shut the audience out in a way from my experience. This time, it was my personal experience. And perhaps they were viewing on that screen what were my memories. But they did not have access to me as I was remembering them. What started out as an exercise in courage and honesty had, four years later, in its final version, now embodied my need to protect myself from the audience. I found that the performance of the text, for better or worse, was more emotional in this version, less controlled or restrained, like someone who will only cry alone, not in front of others. I did turn to face the audience

during the “These Words” section, which ends in a loud scream. So their only interaction with me face to face was in my self-denial, the attempt to silence my speech. The orgasm voiceover had been eliminated by this time and the sexuality, the hedonism that I sought in the original version was now subsumed entirely to trauma. I had lost my nerve. Maybe this was the sign that things were truly “back to normal,” that the experiments of the original version had given way to old habits. Or maybe I was just tired from the annual display of my deepest memories of fear, insecurity, and personal relationships. Whatever the case, it was clear that the piece had traveled a journey along with me.

In every single performance, the audience comments have been positive. Audiences have received this kind of openness with gratitude and kindness, regardless of how I’ve felt about the staging or execution. Even after the last performance, people were encouraging me to think about restaging it, including my dancer. I have offered to let her work with the piece herself and I feel that if it is to stay in circulation, it will have to become someone else’s piece now. As a writer and a performer, it’s hard to jettison that, to take something that has so much of you and so much of your work out of your repertoire, and so there’s a grieving that I do for it each time I think about never performing it again. But I also know that I just don’t have it in me to continue this particular piece and it now has to become a learning experience or a piece to borrow from instead.