

## Breathing, Again

Heidi Rose

It is Friday at 5:00 PM two weeks before final exams, and the Hepburn Teaching Theater at Bryn Mawr College is filling up quickly. We estimate 60-70 people in the audience, more than we had expected. The performance—15 individuals' original stories and poetic expressions of self—is raw, funny, painful, unsettling, joyful, fierce and juicy (to borrow two of Tim Miller's favorite words)—and wholly mesmerizing because of the unparalleled energy and commitment delivered by the performers and experienced with equal energy and support by the spectators.

I am breathing deeply and freely now in a way that I have not been able to for two months. *I begin my piece.*

Two months prior to this moment, the University where I have taught since 1993 rescinded my invitation to performance artist and teacher Tim Miller, who had been scheduled to teach a one-week solo performance workshop. I will most likely never know who forwarded my internal campus call to participate in Tim's workshop to the Cardinal Newman Society (CNS)<sup>1</sup>. Upon receipt of this email the CNS immediately launched a campaign on their website condemning the invitation and advancing blatantly false claims and damning innuendo about Tim Miller and his work. Within two weeks the University decided to cancel the workshop. Within another week I had arranged for the workshop to be relocated at Bryn Mawr College.

*I begin my piece*, and I realize that the chair of my department, the colleague and friend with whom I experienced significant conflict over the University's actions, is sitting inches away from where I would end the piece, inches away from words and action flung into the space between us that implicate his voice and body in relation to censorship and the values championed by performance studies. When you view the

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The Cardinal Newman Society is a conservative Catholic organization that lobbies (i.e., pressures and bullies) Catholic colleges and universities (and ministries associated with other institutions of higher education) to uphold strict conservative Catholic values. Their stated view is that "the essential elements of Catholic education have been discarded for the sake of a mistaken notion of academic freedom" and that students should "seek understanding through Faith and Reason, made complete by a free obedience to the Eternal Law. Gaudium de veritate, the joy of truth's discovery, is the treasure entrusted to the Catholic university." See <http://www.cardinalnewmansociety.org/AboutUs/tabid/53/Default.aspx>

performance,<sup>2</sup> there is a slight pause right after “anti-Catholic” that does not fit (at approx. 2:00 on the video). You might assume that I forgot a line. I didn’t. Up to this moment I was aware of the Villanova colleagues and students in the audience. They were easy to identify as the performance progressed because we could all see one another, as the performers weaved throughout the space and moved the audience with us. My piece was last. Up to this moment, however, no one stepped in the crisis was so physically close to my body. That moment of hesitation, that near paralysis, was the fullness of the moment flooding my consciousness. But in that same moment, I was strengthened. Here, on stage, the agency was mine, at long last. The words would be heard in a way not acknowledged two months prior, when I had spoken similar words in several meetings on campus.

The words spoken in those many crucial but ultimately futile meetings two months prior were abstractions, words without context, without a center; the language I spoke did not appear to be understood and was not persuasive. But here, on this stage, the words act in, through and beyond my body with force because Tim Miller is no longer an abstraction; he is actually here demonstrating unequivocally that his work stands and advocates for human rights and human dignity, values certainly purportedly shared by the University. And my piece is last: every spectator has experienced with all of their senses the electric beauty of these thirteen students and two professors working together and telling stories that speak to all of us. And the protected and generative space of the performance happened because this is what Tim does as an educator.

The five-day solo performance workshop that preceded this public performance was everything that it was designed and meant to be, as well as both less than and more. *Less than*, because it was intended to bring together disparate voices within Villanova—undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff (I had even invited my Dean to participate): roughly 20 individuals who would develop trust with and insight into themselves and each other and then share their truths with the larger community in the performance generated from the workshop, as part of larger efforts toward community dialogue and diversity initiatives. *Less than*, as well, because the workshop could not help being clouded by the vicious and hateful force of the CNS postings. *Everything that it was meant to be*, because the students experienced the warmth, generosity, energy, and creative spark of Tim Miller, and the audience witnessed the fruits of his teaching. *More than*, because students from Bryn Mawr, Haverford College, and Villanova connected and collaborated in ways that rarely if ever happen, despite the 2-mile radius that encompasses the three campuses. The barriers to communication and understanding were struck down and alliances were formed by the workshop’s move to Bryn Mawr.

When the University cancelled Tim Miller’s solo performance workshop, the solid ground under my feet turned gelatinous, eradicating all sense of balance. A place

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<sup>2</sup> To view the video, also in *Liminalities* 8.2, go to <http://liminalities.net/8-2/breathing.html>

*Heidi Rose*

in which I had always felt safe, a place of mutual respect, no longer held stability. Social justice and human rights efforts characterize much of the teaching, scholarship and service of this University. All of that good work matters, which is precisely why this act of discrimination and injustice was incomprehensible. If that one single person had not sent my email to the CNS, the workshop likely would have happened with little fanfare and I would not be writing this now.

Many people at the University share my position but few understand why I continue to take the situation so “personally.” Hearing this word employed to characterize my reaction gives me pause. Personally. Involving my personhood. My body. My voice. My being, values, teaching, scholarship. The cancellation was no less than a physical assault to my very being as an educator. So, yes, this is personal. Don’t our values, beliefs, and ethics infuse every word we speak in and out of the classroom, and every action we take? Our humanity calls for nothing less. Until this moment I had never had to face these questions as threats to my life in education.

In the original vision of the workshop I had hoped the group would include students, faculty, and staff. Once the workshop relocated the mix was reduced to two professors, four Villanova students, and nine students from Bryn Mawr and Haverford. As an equal member of the workshop ensemble but also as a professor marked by the controversy, I had no intention of creating a performance addressing the cancellation, at least no conscious intention. There were plenty of other stories vying for attention. The memory of my friend Matthew and speaking out against hate and ignorance in third grade surprised me when it materialized during the first night of the workshop, after the prompt to consider a time in our lives when we told the truth; during the second night, however, with a new prompt to explore alternative stories via the drawing of “body maps” to help uncover places and spaces on our bodies that held unnamed or undiscovered stories, my focus shifted to a different topic. But that night I dreamed about my friend Matthew. When Matthew was verbally attacked in third grade, the response was easy. When Tim was verbally attacked, the response should have been equally easy, but it was not. And this is why I had difficulty breathing. Working with Tim and all the students in the Bryn Mawr theater—it became clear that this was the story that needed to be told. At this time. In this space. With this public.

Tim and I talked about various meanings that could be ascribed to addressing the situation so directly. I did not want to do anything that was self-serving or hurtful to him, so we agreed that I would see where my instincts led me on the third night of the workshop, and we would go from there. That night, with the opportunity to write during the workshop, I found a way to link the two moments involving my childhood friend Matthew and my new friend Tim, chipping away at the excess to leave a spare, unadorned linkage between then and now, the child and the adult. And by the fourth night the piece made sense relative to all that Tim’s work with colleges and universities embodies, and it gave larger and clearer purpose to my presence in the workshop.

The spaces of our lives as educators became profoundly fraught, heightened, and threatened with this incident. My inability to breathe deeply came from absorbing too many deeply conflicting perspectives and tenuous positions created by pressures within, outside, and far beyond the University. Reaching out to Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges and gaining their support to schedule the workshop at Bryn Mawr provided some agency, but not enough.

What was produced in this performance is incomplete, is also not enough, but it is a start. In the moment it felt good. In the moment I felt some agency return. As teachers of performance studies, we create safe classrooms for our students so that they may find their voices and tell meaningful stories through performance. We bring our variously raced, gendered, and sexually oriented bodies (among other identities and issues) into the classroom and perform multiple identities for and with our students as we claim the role of teacher. We perform and publish our individual explorations of self and culture in autoethnographies for professional publics that may or may not include our students. Not often, however, does a need and opportunity arise to engage our own voices and bodies, both for and with our students in the same space, and with as much vulnerability as we ask of our students. The performance featured here arose out of such an exigency.

*The piece ends.* After a moment, one by one, each performer repeats a ritual that opens the show as they pick up their own pair of shoes (we are all barefoot) and speak a line beginning “These are the shoes of [someone/a person/a woman/a man, etc.] who...,” bringing closure to their individual stories and the performance as a whole. My line, “These are the shoes of a teacher, who wants all of us to also have a voice off stage,” attempts to draw attention to the opposition and injustice that brought us together in the first place, the potency we found with and through each other within the protected space of the workshop and on stage, and the responsibility we have as performers and audience to bear witness to the work and its message beyond this particular moment in time.

The piece ends and I don’t want to leave—because the performance space is where we desire to return, again and again, the space that allows us fully to be ourselves, the place in which we feel safe enough to be vulnerable and to draw strength from that vulnerability. More than anything, this experience and performance underscores what performance *does*. In this performance I said publicly what, for many perhaps necessary but unquestionably insufficient reasons, I could not say off stage, in print, or on the air. Performance creates space to address and move through crisis, to bring people together in a space of safety—not comfort but safety—where words and bodies can say what at times cannot be said either privately or in other public spaces. This is what performance *does* in the world. There, at Bryn Mawr College, it gave me back the public voice I temporarily lost. Here, in this journal, we can reflect critically on that performance and make sure that the story continues to be told.



Heidi Rose

<performance text>

**“Untitled” – developed for performance workshop led by Tim Miller, April 2012**

Heidi Rose

*[I pop up from the audience, who are sitting on either side of a long rectangular lit space, and move to one end of the lit space.]*

I'm eight. And I've recently received my first marriage proposal, from Victor Colona.

*[very low, almost a murmur, the other performers begin a chant under my speaking, repeating: "Hate. Fear. Hate. Fear..."]*

I don't really want to marry Victor (I'd rather marry Kenny Rait), but—Victor did sneak into his parents' room, took a ring from his mother's jewelry box, and gave it to me at recess! My mom makes me give it back. But still—

Walking home from school one day with Brenda and Caroline, Victor calls our friend Matthew a nigger.

A volcano erupts inside me. No thinking. Just action.

“Don't you ever call him that. You are not my friend anymore.”

I am eight. And I am ten feet tall.

*[I begin walking slowly across the space, between the audience, towards the opposite end.]*

I trusted. I was betrayed.

And I trust, again.

*[At opposite end, turn to audience]*

I'm not eight now.

*Breathing, Again*

More hate. More fear. More bigotry: “He’s a militant anti-Catholic gay rights activist. He desecrated the host. He simulates sex on stage. His art is obscene. She should be fired.”

*[the chant stops]*

A volcano erupts inside me. No thinking. Just action.

“LIES!”—“*[gasp—hand grabs throat]* Strangled. Not enough action. *[other arm behindback]* Handcuffed. Too much thinking. Imprisoned. *[arms back at sides]*

Betrayed. Again.

*[I address both sides of audience, making as much eye contact as possible.]*

There will always be hate. There will always be fear. There will always be lies.

But I am still that eight year-old.

And I will be ten feet tall, again.