

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Restorative justice on/off stage: mobilising fringe towards communities of consent

Thea Fitz-James\*

(THE CLOWN enters. She shows the audience a placard. It reads):

*I was raped*

(THE CLOWN places the placard on the ground. She steps over it, and holds up another card. It reads:)

*But I got over it*

*Post traumatic super delightful*, by Antonia Lassar

The Canadian Association of Fringe Festivals (CAFF) is made up of 33 performance festivals across Canada and the United States. Following the original Edinburgh Fringe Festival model, the CAFF is theatrical equivalent of ‘the archetypal theoretical model of global free trade, where virtually anything goes’ (Knowles, 2004: 186). For an administrative fee, fringe festivals provide performers with a venue and a technician. Participants, who are selected by lottery, receive 100 per cent of box-office sales and have complete creative control. While most productions are selected through fringe lotteries run by each individual festival, the CAFF lottery gives ten artists the opportunity to tour to at least five fringes in a summer (travelling from east to west across Canada and the United States). Even beyond the CAFF lottery, touring is a common practice among the fringe, with a touring community developing every summer. We travel together, we promote together, we celebrate together. For up to four months in the summer (and more if you decide to go to Australia or the UK), the ‘fringe family’ is something of a travelling circus, with many lasting friendships built along the way.

And yet, due to the transient nature of this community, it is also an environment that attracts people who do harm. Given that there is no centralised human-resource model across the fringe, and each festival is run by unique stakeholders with different goals, systems for reporting, tracking, and resolving sexual assaults or misconduct – between two fringe performers, or between performers and volunteers, audience members, or other fringe patrons – are inconsistent or non-existent. In 2019, I wrote about the fringe community and restorative justice, wondering if this was a method we could employ to address the harm within our community – harm that to this day exists primarily in whisper networks and

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Thea Fitz-James

Facebook messages (Fitz-James, 2019). I was drawn to restorative justice as a model that attempts ‘to involve all parties (perpetrators, victims, and community members) in determining the appropriate response to a crime in an effort to restore the community to wholeness’ (Smith, 2011: xv–xvi). Further, I was excited by the suggestion that restorative justice – when done properly – is necessarily creative. Creative here does not mean artistic but is a method to explore alternatives to the values of the state bureaucracy: the uniformity, regularity, and predictability assumed of judicial and punitive systems (Johnstone, 2013: 17). I wondered: what kinds of restorative justice practices might be embraced in order to create communities of accountability and truly address the many named and unnamed occurrence of sexual assault and rape on the fringe?

There are many examples of restorative justice on fringe stages. Due to the independent and uncurated nature of fringe participants and content, many survivors tell the story of sexual assault in unique and creative ways. In my own show *Drunk girl*, I played drinking games with the audience before gleefully and satirically leading them in the frosh rape cheer that made headline in Canada in 2013 and 2014, in an effort to create community accountability and comment on rape culture on college campuses. In comedian Gillian English’s show *Bitter shrew*, she reflects on experiences of violence against women in the comedy scene. Titled after a review she received for a previous show, where the author unironically labelled her a bitter shrew, English offers an unapologetic reflection on sexual assault and violence against women. I first saw her show at Montreal Fringe in 2018. Only hours before, 22-year-old aspiring comedian Euridice Dixon’s – a member of English’s community – was raped and murdered as she walked home through Melbourne Australia’s Princes Park after a comedy gig. In her performance, English asked, as she had done many nights previously, what women hold in their hands when walking home alone at night. The women in the audience mumbled simultaneously, ‘my keys.’ She then went on to hilariously and outrageously educate the audience in not only the best way to hold keys if attacked (one key between each finger), but also how to – literally – ‘rip off the dick’ of an attacker. In these moments, English helps identify the unconscious internalised systems that women have adopted to protect ourselves. I found something like a community of survivors in the audience, through the hyperbole, our identification, and our laughter. But in the wake of Dixon’s murder, the laughter had edge. Because the danger is not hyperbolic: we are being attacked, we are being killed.

Interestingly, theatre intrinsically engages in some aspects of restorative justice. Of course, there is a difference between staging a show on the realities of sexual violence with an eye towards restorative justice methodologies and truly facilitating a restorative justice encounter. That said, while housed in fiction, a play or performance piece can invite a restorative justice encounter, repair and even transformation within communities. Some theatre theorists see the concept of transforming communities as core to theatre’s *raison d’être*. From Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre, to Bertolt Brecht’s Dialectic Theatre, theatre being a mimetic method of storytelling does not necessarily negate its transformative impact.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more see Brecht (1964).

Theatre has the potential to engage in truth-telling in unique ways: through theatrical devices, including verisimilitude and catharsis, theatre can – as is oft-quoted – hold a mirror up to life, inviting audiences to reflect on their own lives and truths. Historically, this made seeing theatre an important process of civic and moral positioning of the self in community. From Aristotle to Brecht, theatre helps the viewer better understand, or ‘purify’ one’s own negative emotions (Aristotle) and can invite an audience to reflect critically on the social causes of human suffering (Brecht).<sup>2</sup> As such, when looking at the potential of engaging in restorative justice through theatre, while theatre is certainly engaged in powerful truth-telling and community building, I believe it can also enact reparative moments. In theory, at any rate. This is potentially where theatre makers interested in adopting a restorative justice approach have work to do: while truth-telling and communities of accountability seem natural fits to a theatrical method, building these efforts towards reparative action is a harder path to mark. Is truth-telling enough to pave the way towards transformative communities?

A good example of restorative justice approaches on stage is the fringe show, *Post traumatic super delightful (PTSD)* by Antonia Lassar. This one-woman clown show is a fictional exploration of the community experiences after a sexual assault happens on a college campus. Lassar brings to life the perspectives of a university professor, a Title IX coordinator, and the young man accused of rape. These talking-head style monologues are punctuated by clown ‘turns’, in which Lassar combines laughter with the community reactions to rape and sexual violence. Through her research in creating the show – and by adopting the voices of not only university administrators, but other community members, and the young man himself – the show decentralises the rape and focuses on the community it affects, and the number of different ways that the community responds. With the addition of the clown, who tentatively and sweetly explores the humour to be found in a life-after-rape, the play offers a survivor-centric story that focuses on restoration, resolution and life. Here, we see the restorative justice encounter – with all in the community having an equal say – enacted on stage. We also see something of a restorative justice repair, with Lassar-as-survivor and Lassar-as-performer both inviting the audience into her own healing process. Here, the show highlights restorative justice as a method to bring communities together after an incident of sexual violence. But they do not come together harmoniously; the show does not have a ‘happy’ or uncomplicated resolution. The question of community transformation (through restorative justice) remains unanswered. The play ends with Antonia-as-Clown listening to a ‘voice of god’ recording of Antonia-as-Playwright singing a song about the ceiling fan she focused on during her own rape. ‘This song was the first piece of art I made as a survivor,’ she tells us (2015: 27).

A ceiling fan, the only one who saw  
I wish a ceiling fan could cry

All the words I know sound like clichés

2 For more see Aristotle (2013).

Thea Fitz-James

Mine and his just feel out of place  
Touch and hurt and throw her on the floor  
Sound so simple words I've heard before

Staying silent praying to the sky  
For my mother to hold me while I cry  
No one noticed, it sounds like it's a lie  
Even breathing feels like I might die

I've cried I screamed my knees have bled  
Just to erase this picture in my head  
He's crying, he can barely see  
For all my pain, he hurts worse than me

I wish a ceiling fan could cry (2015: 28)

When I saw the show during Edmonton Fringe in 2015, I was at the festival performing my own show, *Naked ladies*, an academic and personal exploration of nudity in performance. This show was an attempt to love my body after my experience with sexual violence. In one moment in the show, I performed a movement and spoken word piece in a slip, symbolising my body after rape and through the lens of the historic practice and my personal experience of pathologising survivors. This was the first piece I created as a survivor.

Don't tell me I'm soft all over, tactile. Don't tell me I make you itch. Do I twinkle, like that bitch that left you. Quite the catch. That itch that you can't help but scratch. That sweet piece of snatch. Taste it, make it last. I cut I pull I bitch – It's not irrational, it's just the wrecking ball that broke my fucking back. Freud says the only thing closer to grief is narcissism. So when you're done gazing, when you're done fucking gazing, maybe then you'll finally hear me, because I've been yelling for years, to the point where the words get stuck in my throat, like I'm choking. Like a fucking Pokemon. Like Aradne, stuck on the beach, yelling: are you fucking kidding me! Love me! Just fucking love me! Because I was promised happy. And I was promised talking animals. And I was promised a nemesis. Dress me up, and diagnose me, SAVE ME. Save me you mother fuckers, because I'm playing the victim here. (2015: np)

**Figure 1** *Performer Thea Fitz-James in her piece *Naked ladies*, performed at the Cucalorus Festival in North Carolina, November 2015. Image credit: Paige Marsicano.*



Offered sardonically and with a manic energy, this piece spoke to the ‘role’ women are asked to play in a victim-blaming narrative; if I’m ‘playing the victim,’ in the patriarchal script, then who am I playing against? Where is my Theseus? Oh right, he is also my abuser.

Indeed, a fringe festival is an ideal venue to stage these themes. Fringe festivals are unjuried and explicitly celebrate innovations in form and content; yet, these innovations are not echoed off stage, within the CAFF community. There is a contradiction between fringe content and community. In adopting restorative justice approaches, some CAFF artists are trying to unite the fringe towards a community of consent; one in which all are welcome in the encounter, in which efforts of community healing and integration are survivor-lead, in which we understand that the people who do harm in our community reflects poorly on us all. In my dreams, the power of truth told on stage is echoed through our community’s shard values. And yet, upon waking, some tenets of restorative justice practices are notoriously missing: are we truly able to address root causes of harm done when our colleagues are not able to acknowledge their wrongdoing? How can we take steps towards community repair when there are no efforts to make amends? The neoliberal model of the fringe – which prioritises the individual over the collective – smacks against these larger community goals.

In attempting to understand how to mobilise the fringe community towards a community of consent, I conducted six personal interviews on this topic.<sup>3</sup> The

3 I had the opportunity to speak to Antonia Lassar, Sydney Hayduk, Natalie Frijia, Stéphanie Morin-Robert, Polly Ester and Megan Dart.

Thea Fitz-James

conversations and discussion ranged greatly: we tried to clearly name the problem; we shared personal anecdotes and experiences of violence; we guessed at solutions; we ranted and cried about the contradiction that we seem to be living. It feels contradictory to love a community that hurts you. That love feels like it is perpetuating a cycle of violence that – once again – asks survivors to contort themselves, to tie themselves in knots in order to not rock the neoliberal capitalist boat on which we all float. The conversations I had with Fringe performers are steeped in these contradictions. And no one, including myself, seems quite comfortable enough to make some potential pearl-clutching claims: That our (mostly) male colleagues don't care that we are being raped. That the fringe community isn't interested in being a safe space for women, people of colour, or disabled people. That fringe festival organisers profit directly off the performances of rapists and sexual abusers. That this will not change, because no one in power is interested in changing it. I say these claims here, because they haunt these conversations and they haunt my thoughts.

I should be clear that there are some people in power very interested in creating a culture of consent on the fringe. Speaking to Edmonton Fringe Executive Director Megan Dart, she introduces me to the Edmonton Fringe's responsive Safer Spaces Program, and the efforts, partnerships, and training that they have undertaken in order to prioritise consent culture at their festival. In developing the programme, she tells me of the backlash that it originally faced:

In 2019 there was an anti-safer spaces movement that was built around the festival... their big thing was 'fringe is unjuried and uncensored' and our response every single time was, 'on stage. On stage it's unjuried and uncensored.' That does not extend beyond the performance place.... Attending the festival is not unjuried and uncensored. That's not how this works. And that's a thing we've had to continue to clarify with folks: The art is unjuried and uncensored; the experience is safe. (Dart, 2021: Personal Interview)

After the experience of 2019, the festival organising team came to the realisation that 'we cannot engage in a conversation about restorative justice if you don't even understand where the mistake happened in the first place' (ibid). And so, the festival began to develop a pedagogical platform called Fringe Learn; the first course is on creating a culture of consent. Created in collaboration with Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE), the course offers an introduction to different aspects of consent through what Dart terms, 'story-based learning,' hiring artists to create an audio play to talk about consent and power dynamics (ibid). The course is a simple but effective piece, and after a successful pilot year, they are making it mandatory for all artists, staff, and volunteers for their 2022 festival. Their goal is to create something that every fringe in CAFF can use and implement with their own communities; '[w]hen we launched Fringe Learn, it was with the intention to make this tool available to every fringe festival on the CAFF circuit' (ibid). In taking on the responsibility of educating their community, Edmonton fringe is attempting to create a community of accountability and to prioritise ethical and shared values. This aligns with the direction Hayduk believes we should go:

I believe that if we were in a learning environment without the pressure for individualistic success, then perhaps empathy and compassion for each other might be more prevalent.... The reckoning needs to come from everyone in the community coming together. Almost the way you cannot enter a restaurant without a vaccine status card. To enter the Fringe must mean to enter a safe space. (Hayduk, 2021: email)

There's perhaps something pedagogical at the heart of *PTSD* as well. When Lassar and I speak about the show, she tells me that she was particularly inspired by the Indigenous Hopi Clown. These clowns (or tsukskut)

participate in a ritual drama called tsukulalwa during these katsina ceremonies... [T]he clowns 'depict life as it should not be', that is, behavior that is qahopi (bad, misbehaving, nonconforming). Although they are clowns, these tsukskut are also priests whose role is sacred and serious. (Hieb, 2008: 107)

In talking through the role of the clown, Lassar reminds me of the jester archetype, who sits outside of a community and can reflect back the truth of that community.

Fringe performers have the opportunity to be jesters for their community, to exemplify restorative justice practices, and speak to the truth of their community through performance and laughter. But they can only do so if we treat their roles as 'sacred and serious'. While it is exciting that restorative justice journals, such as this one, are interested in what art and performance can offer their field, and help advance restorative justice practices, I hope that the arts and culture space can find a similar interest in what restorative justice can offer Canadian creative communities, and prioritise safe spaces and policies within our communities. While it is Dionysus – the god of theatre and wine – who eventually saves Ariadne on the beach, that does not mean his actions should not be under scrutiny; theatre too, plays a part in the systemic perpetuation of rape culture that restorative justice seeks to unpack. The assault and rape within the fringe community is not unique. Not to theatre, not to the arts.

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Thea Fitz-James

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