

The Talk by Sonny Kelly

The Talk as Performance Art:

The Talk is a one-man performance that draws on the voices of ancestors, elders, youths, and intellectuals to engage in the difficult conversations that we must have with our children as we prepare them to survive and thrive in a racialized America. This eclectic theatrical experience weaves together interactive theater, literature, a dynamic embodied performance, and a multi-media production.

The Talk was born of a painful conversation that I had to have with my son upon hearing about riots in the streets of West Baltimore, MD, in the wake of Freddie Gray's death in 2015. I had no choice but to explain the cause of all of this mayhem. Ultimately, it was a black man. It took me a week to digest the anguish that this awkward anguished conversation had caused me. The result was "Sterling's Story," an 8-minute narrative about my love for my son and the despair that I felt in having to inform him that he lived in a world where some people – important people who wield the power to harm him – would not value his life as I did. When I learned that "Sterling's Story" was part of a larger phenomenon known as "The Talk," I knew that I had to do more with this story. I knew that it could begin to humanize the racialized politics of issues like "stop and frisk," "zero tolerance" school policies, and the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline." Over the course of two years, I developed *The Talk* alongside my director and dramaturg UNC Chapel Hill Artist in Residence, Joseph Megel. What has emerged is a dynamic piece of theater that is more *experience* than performance.



This experience includes a post-show talk-back and pursues three objectives. First, *The Talk* mobilizes performance toward the end of developing a critical consciousness around race issues in America today. Secondly, *The Talk* moves audiences in such a manner that it incites action toward more just, equitable, and honest interpersonal interactions in our society. Finally, *The Talk* doesn't just tell *my* story – it gives voice to an anguish that parents of color, and especially parents of black boys, endure daily in this country. In this sense, *The Talk* is an act of compassionate solidarity with all of those who have experienced criminalization, disenfranchisement, or marginalization in our society.

By performing narratives that explore the trauma of marginalization and oppression that racism inflicts on human bodies and minds I invite audience members to experience with me what Augusto Boal (1995) calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to imagine new possibilities together.

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The Talk as Artistic Process

This project has confirmed for me the truth that an artist's work should be a direct outgrowth and manifestation of her personal lived experience. Our artistic work is ultimately, a beautiful expression of our own deeply held truths. If we want our work to matter and to last, we must go beyond style, medium, and marketability to dig deeper into the root of the work – our truth, and our need to tell it visually, verbally, musically, and/or kinesthetically.

The most profound and memorable art that we produce is not done simply because we are good at it, or because we feel like it – it is done because it compels us. This requires that we ask some serious questions of ourselves throughout the process of developing, creating and presenting our best work. Why does this work matter? Why do I feel that I *have* to do this work? What do I want this work to *do* in the world? What is this work *doing* to/in me? What is my truth, and how does is this work centered in that truth?

While we should not feel the need to explain every detail of the art we create, we should indeed have an idea of what the work is doing in us and around us. Dramatist Peter Brook (1996) argues that “A word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictate the need for expression” (p. 12). He goes on to declare, “I have learned that “the best dramatists explain themselves the least” (p. 13). Replace the word “dramatist” with “artist,” and we can apply this concept to any field of art. When our work is rooted in our truth and driven by purpose, it can speak powerfully for itself. It also lends itself to more clear and concise descriptions.

Critical performance practitioner Augusto Boal (195) privileges performance spaces as “*spaces of liberty* where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (p. 5). Performance theorist Diane Taylor (2004) argues that the performative repertoire (our portfolios and bodies of artistic work) are actually valid sources of knowledge, on par with any academic book or report. When we honor our work in this way, as activated truth, it stands for something more than ornamentation or production – something timeless.

Works Cited

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