

THE CENTRAL SCHOOL OF SPEECH AND DRAMA

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET

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COURSE: MA Theatre Studies (Performance and the City)

UNIT TITLE: Writing with Communities

ASSIGNMENT TITLE: Working Women: An Intergenerational Theatre Project
Bringing Women Together in the State College, PA Community

Working Women: An Intergenerational Theatre Project Bringing Women Together in the State College, PA Community

The blunt truth is that men still run the world...In the November 2012 election in the United States, women won more congressional seats than ever before, bringing them up to 18 percent. In the United Kingdom, 22 percent of seats in Parliament are held by women. In the European Parliament, one-third of the seats are held by women. None of these figures are close to 50 percent. (Sandberg 2013: 5)

Facebook COO, Sheryl Sandberg has started a passionate campaign, Lean In, to bring to light the fact that women are still not equal in the government and the workforce. The numbers above would indicate that women are a minority, when in reality women make up half the population. The women's rights movement has slowed and Sandberg's vision is to re-ignite women's passions for equality around the developed world and beyond. Women in the workforce still face challenges of discrimination, un-equal pay, and, in the United States, no federally mandated paid maternity leave. For many women this forces them to make a choice between having a family and pursuing an enriching and challenging career. These issues have to be tackled somehow and I believe that the answer is in the rising generation of female workers. When these girls enter the workforce they can demand equal pay and the same rights as their male colleagues. I plan to conduct a theatre project to inspire girls to know their rights and not let their gender keep them from their career goals. The theatre project will be intergenerational so that they older women can exchange knowledge with the younger girls. Combining the perspectives of girls still dreaming of what they want to do and retired women who have lived through their careers should spark interesting and fruitful conversations. The aim of my intergenerational theatre project is to facilitate dialogue between middle school girls and retired women about career aspirations and challenges in the workforce. Through conversation, role-playing, improvisation, and script writing I hope to brainstorm solutions to work place challenges and to inspire the younger girls to work towards their highest aspirations and strive for equality in the workforce. In this paper, I will assess whether such a task is possible. Can a theatre arts project be successful in bringing together intergenerational groups to explore women's aspirations and roles in the work force?

First, we must look to previous intergenerational theatre projects. The most closely related project is Sue Mayo's Wild, Wild Women. This is part of a larger organization called Magic Me: The UK's Leading Provider of Intergenerational Arts Projects. The Wild, Wild Women project brings together intergenerational groups to create performances about women. This year their project with the Women's Library will focus on the stories of women who have made a difference in history (Mayo 2013). The goal of the project is to create 'a unique performance featuring women from the history books and stories from their own lives, and those of family and friends' (Age of Creativity 2013). As this explanation suggests, Wild, Wild Women uses both historical and autobiographical techniques. This project is a prime example of a successful intergenerational women's performance piece. The Wild, Wild Women project has been going strong for ten years. Every performance is sold out and the responses from participants are positive. This proven track record of success is going to be documented in a research report by Dr. Caoimhe McAvinchey of Queen Mary, University of London due in November 2013 (Magic Me 2013). Sue Mayo's Wild, Wild Women is a positive example of an intergenerational women's performance project's success in the United Kingdom.

Cultural Conversations is a play festival that occurs in State College, PA, USA each winter. Like Wild, Wild Women this play festival also has a proven track record of success. For the past seven years Cultural Conversations has dealt with an issue of local or global diversity. Dr. Susan Russell who runs the festival at Penn State University has worked with girls for a few of the aforementioned seven years. Most notable of these is the project, Body Language. Body Language brought together a community of young girls in the State College Area to tackle 'one of the most vital issues facing educators and parents today: female body image and self-esteem' (Russell 2010: 9) Through the use of theatrical techniques, Body Language began a conversation between the girls about their perceptions of their bodies and themselves. Russell used 'proven playwriting techniques and practices [to] promote both personal and cultural observations. Body Language 2010 devoted itself to one of the most valuable resources on the planet: a girl' (2010: 9). The Body Language project made the girls more aware of themselves and their attitudes about the bodies that house them. The project also made them aware of larger cultural

movements and campaigns that may affect their attitudes about themselves. Parents also noted that they learned so much about their children after they participated in the Body Language program. This shows that through a theatrical medium, projects like this give adolescent students a 'larger' voice when they appear onstage. Although Body Language was not an intergenerational project, it was a highly successful community based theatre piece that worked with the same middle school students in the State College Area that I am planning on engaging with. Knowing that Body Language was a great success and that it paved the way for my project is encouraging and inspiring. Body Language had a highly successful performance at the conclusion of the workshop. Following the experience Russell published a book with some of the students monologues as well as a 'how to' guide to lead a similar project in other schools. This project is a great example of how women and girls can benefit from a theatrical encounter.

In my own project I aim to have both middle school girls and retired women come together for an intergenerational theatre arts project in State College, Pennsylvania. The retired women will be from The Village at Penn State, a retirement home for residents that have had a previous affiliation with the Pennsylvania State University. Many of the residents are former professors and thus many of the women in the retirement community were pioneers in their fields, as they were among some of the first female professors. Both of the communities coming together will be sharing their own stories, thus engaging with autobiographical performance. Groups of women using autobiographical performance are not new. Dr. Deirdre Heddon notes that female autobiographical performance was used in the early 1970's when women translated 'personal- or autobiographical- material into live performance [which] was inarguably tied to consciousness- raising activities [that] focused analysis specifically on women's experiences (2008: 21). My proposed project is also linked to these 'consciousness-raising activities.' I aim to raise awareness in the Middle School girls about the reality they are going to face, while also using their ambition as a beacon of hope and encouragement for both the audience and the older group of women engaging with the project. However, the retired women are not passive in this project. Pam Schweitzer, who has worked with Reminiscence Theatre techniques for twenty three years as an artistic director, notes that intergenerational projects have a danger of 'an unequal relationship,

wherein young people [are] effective and older people [are] without resources of their own (2007: 23). My project is far from that reality. Although the younger middle school girls will be sharing their aspirations and impressions of the workplace, most of the ‘teaching’ will come from the retired women and their memories of real life experiences in the work place. They will act as resources for the Middle School Students to ask questions and interrogate occupations and life choices. Both parties will contribute to the final performance piece and everyone will share a part of their story. Schweitzer goes on to champion the power of true collective intergenerational work, like I am suggesting.

At its most developed, however, the work has involved young and old performing together and this has undoubtedly been the most adventurous and fulfilling experience for all concerned. To watch the two age groups get to know, like and understand each other, work together over a period of months and develop into a creative team giving pleasure to others and satisfaction to themselves has been one of the high points for me working in this field’ (Schweitzer 2007: 192).

My project also aims to bring two age groups together in the hopes that they will enrich each other’s lives and the lives that surround them. I believe that older and younger women speaking about their hopes and fears in the workforce will encourage both parties to understand each other better as well as pass on their unique perspective on our discussion topics. I am encouraged by the proven track records of intergenerational work and I believe that it can be a wonderful tool in a variety of situations, especially regarding women in the workforce.

I believe that a theatre arts project can bring these groups together and mutually benefit both generations. Sue Mayo has proved this work effective with her Wild, Wild Women project, as part of Magic Me. Susan Russell has demonstrated that theatre arts projects work in State College, PA through the proven track record of the Cultural Conversations Festival. Russell has also demonstrated that girls bloom and thrive in a theatre arts environment and are able to find their voices onstage. Additionally, Deirdre Heddon highlights that there is a history of women engaging in autobiographical theatre. Heddon also states that theatre for and about women can help to further women’s causes and issues, like my proposed project on women in the workplace. Finally, Schweitzer highlights the mutual benefits of both generations when diverse age groups come together.

All signs point towards a successful project. Maybe with the implementation of such projects, someday we will inspire women to take charge and make Parliament 50/50.

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