Enabling the Ongoing Life of Therapeutic Theatre: A Case Study of *Positively Shameless*

Shabari Rao, Shilpa Waghmare, Maitri Gopalakrishna

Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Volume 36, Number 1, Fall 2021, pp. 161-169 (Article)

Published by The University of Kansas, Department of Theatre and Dance
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0031*

Enabling the Ongoing Life of Therapeutic Theatre: A Case Study of *Positively Shameless*

Shabari Rao, Shilpa Waghmare, Maitri Gopalakrishna

Positively Shameless *is a therapeutic theatre performance (premiered in 2016 and continues to tour) co-created by seven women based in Bangalore, South India. The play took as its starting point aspects of child sexual abuse that endure into adulthood. Most therapeutic theatre processes include an extensive creation and rehearsing period followed by just a single set of performances.* Positively Shameless *is unique because it has endured and evolved over time. In this article we explore the following questions in order to gain insight into this evolution:*

> *What happens to the ongoing life of a play when it has been developed out of sensitive, sometimes confidential personal material, in the context of a therapeutic process? Who makes the decisions about where, how, and when it gets performed again? How are those decisions made?*
>
> *What happens when the play is no longer serving an explicit therapeutic goal, how does it continue to be relevant, both to the ensemble and to a wider audience?*

Through this we distill and articulate ongoing relevance and methodological principles that have enabled the ongoing life of this piece of therapeutic theatre.

Keywords: *therapeutic theatre, collaborative methodology, child sexual abuse*

Introduction

Positively Shameless (*PS*) is a therapeutic theatre performance based on residues of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), which premiered in Bangalore, India, in 2016.[1] The production has since toured nationally (to Hyderabad and Delhi) and internationally (to the United States). In 2020 a tour to Europe and the United States (to New York University and the International Community Arts Festival, Rotterdam) had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this article, we, as theatre makers based in the Global South, theorize our practice. The unique position of this paper can be delineated as being at

Shabari Rao is an artist and academic whose work is rooted in practice-based research and engages with education, mental health, gender, and ecology. Shabari is an Assistant Professor and Head of Performing Arts at RV University, Bangalore.
Shilpa Waghmare is a counselling psychologist in private practice. She does research, writing and training that's located at the intersection of Theology and Psychology. She lives in Bangalore with her husband, two daughters and two dogs.
Maitri Gopalakrishna, PhD, RDT is a drama therapist, counselling psychologist, theatre-maker and practice researcher. Her current research interests include gender and sexual trauma, therapeutic theatre, and drawing on theories and practices from the Natyashastra in therapeutic work.

the intersection of praxis, autobiographical theatre, and therapeutic theatre. It provides a road map of sorts for other practitioners by critically examining *Positively Shameless* as a case study in order to distill principles of practice that we then embed into a theoretical framework. The *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* has previously published a number of articles on these strands,[2] and this article is particularly well placed to weave together these different discourses.

Most therapeutic theatre[3] culminates with a single run of shows that is preceded by an extensive process of creating and rehearsing. However, *PS* has endured and evolved over time, and with each new opportunity to perform. In this article we explore this evolution in order to address the following questions:

> What happens to the ongoing life of a play when it has been developed out of sensitive, sometimes confidential personal material, in the context of a therapeutic process?
>
> Who makes the decisions about where, how, and when it gets performed again? How are those decisions made?
>
> What happens when the play is no longer serving an explicit therapeutic goal, how does it continue to be relevant, both to the ensemble and to a wider audience?

This article was written by three of the seven women who comprise the *PS* ensemble. The whole ensemble agreed that writing this article would be beneficial, but the three authors were interested and available to take it forward. The other ensemble members contributed their reflections, experiences, and what they had learned by responding to specific questions that we put forward through informal interviews and conversations and a questionnaire. They also offered feedback on the paper as a whole. Shabari came into the ensemble as co-director at the beginning of the devising process in 2016. For the 2020 tour she took on the role of a performer. Shilpa started in 2015 as a participant in a drama therapy group led by Maitri. She has been a part of every iteration and tour to date. Maitri initiated the *PS* project in 2016. Her roles have transitioned from therapist to director to performer over the course of the play's life.

Articulating Ongoing Relevance

Positively Shameless began as therapeutic theatre, and so the life of the play after the first run was unchartered territory.[4] The players had originally come to the *PS* project specifically to participate in performance-based group therapy. After the first set of shows was completed, the players determined that their therapeutic goals had been achieved and thus the therapy process was terminated. Consequently, the ensemble was disbanded. Yet, when the opportunity to perform

another set of shows presented itself some months later, the ensemble was motivated to return to the piece. This cycle of letting the play rest, and then returning to it, has continued to occur over the next four years. While the explicit therapeutic process was concluded in 2016, being part of this ensemble and performing the play continues to be compelling to its members. Considering that the motivation to return is neither simply personal nor professional, it becomes interesting to unpack what the ongoing and evolving motivations to return are. It is important to note, however, that the motivations are interlinked and the separations drawn here are simply an attempt at a clearer discussion.

First, for each of us, returning to *PS* meant returning to this particular group of women and the specific culture of practice developed and sustained by this group. One significant aspect of how this group worked was by foregrounding embodied and enacted processes of thinking and decision-making, which are illustrated later in this article. Kavya says, "[I value the] playfulness in the group while we are working on something so serious." Vijji adds, "We don't get to work like this [otherwise]—in a group, body-based, trusting, respectfully held ensemble space." Another significant aspect of how we worked was disrupting established and inherited power dynamics within the ensemble, by honoring the felt sense of desire and discomfort in every member. Therefore, the fact that this ensemble is constituted of these particular women, who have not only have been through a personally transformative process together but have also created a methodology that sustains a culture of democratic and embodied engagement, is central to the motivation to return.

A second reason is advocacy: it was important to us to challenge the silence around CSA and highlight social complicity. Post-show discussions, personal conversations, social media posts, and chance encounters made it clear that the impact on the audience was profound. Therefore, doing more shows made sense. Vijji says, "The kind of conversations that a performance like PS triggers among friends, family members, colleagues, educators, therapists, survivors is much needed." However, this motivation alone was not always strong enough to bring everyone back to the play for every iteration. Sharanya says, "I didn't get involved in the third iteration of the play as it felt personally draining retelling the story, and somehow this retelling seems to lead to more pain. After a point it didn't feel as rewarding in spite of the social message." A third motivation is artistic. Even though many members of the ensemble do not identify as professional artists, and do not engage with *PS* for professional reasons, the opportunity to perform is a significant part of what draws them back to the project. There is a sense of empowerment in being able to reach an audience with something that is so personal. In Sathyam's words, "It felt powerful to allow myself to be seen as a performer." Further, moving away from one's own story and being able to compellingly perform another's story shifted the players away from the testimonial framework and enabled them to explore and access other dimensions

of performance. Sharanya says, "In the last round it was the performance that drew me in, looking at it as an opportunity to enter a story, be fully present, owning and telling a story, personalizing that story as well." Finally, even when the stated therapy goals of the project were achieved, it was clear that there were ongoing therapeutic benefits from being a part of this ensemble. It is perhaps useful here to draw a distinction between a process of therapy and a process that is therapeutic. Beyond training, skill set, and framework of the facilitator,[5] the distinction lies in the intention, explicitly stated goals of the work, and the consequent contract that exists between the participants and the facilitator.[6] *PS* began with players articulating specific therapy goals, but over the first year of the project, those goals were met and the therapy was closed. However, as the project evolved the therapeutic benefits continued to be recognized by the ensemble. For Sathyam, "It is a safe space where I can explore my unacknowledged parts." Similarly, Kavya feels that "it [*PS*] has helped me accept a lot of myself as well as a lot of myself in a female body." And for Sharanya, "It helped me look into aspects other than CSA in the last round, with body image, morality, etc., taking the foreground." Motivations are overlapping, evolving, and occur in relationship to each other. The space and possibility to hold multiple motivations in each member of the ensemble gave members flexibility in how they wanted to engage with each iteration.

The fact that we are a group engaging in creative, expressive mental health work that enables growth is what continues to attract us to the *PS* process and compels us to return. When psychological wellness is not situated only within the individual but also acknowledged as existing through intersecting influences between the individual and various social groups and systems, the limitations of traditional individual paradigms of psychotherapy become more apparent. This limitation—articulated by feminist, Indigenous, and anti-oppression scholars—has sparked debate and reoriented understandings of, and approaches to, mental health practice.[7] Traditional paradigms of therapy contain specific roles and boundaries for therapists that are unethical to transgress. This would make it questionable for therapists and clients to make and tour performances together for years. Therefore, it was perhaps the fact that we terminated the explicit therapy that has allowed *PS* to transform and endure. Thus, the potential of embodied performance arts as a way of addressing mental health becomes more relevant.

Articulating Methodological Principles

In drama therapy, there is no model by way of literature or practice on if and how a piece of therapeutic theatre can continue beyond the first run of shows. The conventional approach to the ownership and authorship of a performance is that it rests with the director and/or production company, where major decisions on the ongoing life of the play are made by the directors/producers. If an actor is not available, they are replaced. Repeating runs of shows involve actors (re)

learning and revising to be able to do in the present what they have already done in the past. There are now increasing debates on the democratization of this power imbalance.[8] Given the subject matter of *Positively Shameless* and the motivations of the ensemble, we did not want to take the conventional approach to performance. For *PS* to have an ongoing life, we needed to develop a specific methodology that would keep the play relevant, beneficial, ethical, and compelling to the ensemble members and the audience. We propose that *PS* offers a methodology by which a democratization of the performance process can be navigated.

In the first iteration of *PS*, each player performed the scene that corresponded to, and was developed out of, their own CSA story. This made the connection between player and scene, as well as the therapeutic work, very direct. However, as expected from therapeutic theatre, working through that material, in the making and performing of the piece, had resolved those specific issues for the players. Thus, if the play and the roles that players performed were to remain static, there would be no further personal benefit to be derived from doing more shows. In Shilpa's words, "We had to whip up vulnerability," which would be exhausting and even potentially re-traumatizing. This is perhaps one of the reasons that most therapeutic theatre performances close after one or one set of shows.[9] Therefore, the only ethical and meaningful way for us to return to *PS* was to keep the play fluid and allow for current realities to find their way into the performance.

PS is not static, defined by an immutable script. Rather, it is held as an anthropomorphic living organism that is intuitive, dynamic, and responsive. This living quality of the play makes it possible for players to experiment with different roles within the play depending on what they want to explore at this moment—for example, rage, forgiveness, sensuality, etc. Equally, the play is open to change and transformation, making room for the present realities of the players. In approaching the play in this way, we acknowledged that while the stories in each scene were specific to an individual and to CSA, the themes dealt with in that scene were universal. Thus, when Maitri chose to play the so-called Maisamma scene, it was to explore her own relationship with anger and rage, rather than a resonance with the narratives in the scene. It also followed that narrative anchors or details of the scene may have to change in a way that supports the current performer's needs. As we did this for each scene, we realized that a new iteration of *PS* was discovered each time we came back to the play. When the play itself and all the commitments regarding its ongoing life were flexible, we needed to evolve a methodological compass to help us arrive at what route we needed to follow.

Embodied Processes

Prioritizing the body in both performance and process has been a core principle for us. In the context of decision-making, this meant that rather than simply sit and debate the pros and cons of different options, we engaged in

embodied, experiential, and enacted processes to arrive at collective decisions. For example, to arrive at the decision to shut down the play in 2017, we created a timeline in the studio. Each player stood at different moments on the timeline and imagined what their relationship to the play would be. Doing it this way puts the focus on each individual ensemble members' investment in, relationship to the play, and desire at each moment in the journey. Doing the exercise in a group offered the possibility to view the ensemble's movement as one organism both from inside and outside. Thus, the embodied process allowed information to be gained from within an individual body and form the interaction of the bodies in space. This composite information map helped us reach a decision on what happened next in the *PS* project. This was significant because how a player is invested in the performance has a crucial bearing on how they perform. A second way in which an embodied approach functioned as a compass was in honoring a felt sense of desire/discomfort. We worked to identify desire/discomfort within our bodies and then communicate this to the group. As a group we committed to making time to honor and explore that desire/discomfort. We may deliberate an issue on a call, over text, email, or using an embodied process in the rehearsal room. We may leave a decision to rest and come back to it later, because often discomfort or desire surface at quiet moments that are outside the rehearsal room/process. Conversely, we operated by a choice for only as long as it sat comfortably for the whole ensemble. This way of working is particularly important given that we were exploring CSA related material in the performance. One of the dynamics and resultant residues of abuse is the deliberate disconnection of the victim from their own embodied instinct (i.e., disregarding discomfort/desire) by force, threat, or coercion. Indeed, this dynamic is a reality in most relationships of unequal power and is perpetuated by systemic inequality such as patriarchy. Therefore, the privileging of desire and discomfort as valid guiding forces in decision-making is an important political stand.

Sustaining a Collaborative Democratic Space

In conventional theatre companies, logistics, rehearsal scheduling, managing finances, communicating with performance venues, etc., would be held by professionals or volunteer production teams. In amateur theatre productions, the person in the company who demonstrated a particular aptitude/skill/interest would be invited to take on (and hold on to) that responsibility. This solidifies roles and responsibilities as well as the hierarchies that go with them, making aspects of the production process opaque and inaccessible to some members of the group. In the *PS* process this modality was actively dismantled by recognizing that it is easy to claim that each member of an ensemble has an equal voice, but quite another thing to operationalize this. Invariably there are those that speak up first and are skilled at articulating a convincing argument. Further, there are those whose roles/former roles in the ensemble endow them a certain power that makes

their opinion carry more weight. One way in which we were able to mitigate this implicit hierarchy was to share and rotate production and performance roles within the ensemble. Role changes were empowering because it enabled democratic access to traditionally restricted aspects of production. In his work on democratic professionalism, Albert W. Dzur outlines how deference and the authority of professionalism can "shrink the space of participation" and diminish "democratic authority" of the community. He asserts "task sharing" to be a route towards democratization.[10] Sharanya's experience echoes this when she shares that "[in 2016] I didn't take on many decision-making roles…There was a clear hierarchy between the directors and the players and many of these key decisions were made by them…In 2020 we were role juggling…and Shabari was also a performer…that eased up the hierarchy." Shilpa agrees and adds, "Because of my continuous engagement with the play since 2016, the increased knowledge, transparency, and communication enhanced my sense of confidence and ownership towards the piece and the ensemble." By 2020, for both Sharanya and Shilpa (and others in the ensemble), task sharing contributed to enable personal capability, horizontal trust, and collective ownership. Thus, switching roles allowed for the verticality to diminish thereby including directors and players as part of a single horizontal community. In addition to production responsibilities, the ensemble also shared certain directorial responsibilities, such as supporting the group in emotionally processing an experience and providing performance feedback. For instance, in 2018 Kavya would often initiate appreciation circles when she felt the group needed to be people-focused and not task-focused. In another example from 2020, Sharanya was struggling to own the scene she had chosen to perform. So Shilpa invited her to work together outside of rehearsal to help her envision her relationship with the protagonist in the scene. Shilpa states, "I felt an affinity with the scene because it had been initially constructed around my experience which explored themes of neediness, dependency, self-hate, and disgust. For Sharanya, the same themes were originating from a different space. Where mine emerged from interpersonal relationships, hers derived from her relationship with herself (intrapersonal)." Working with Sharanya to access the scene in a different way and then watching it being performed provided Shilpa with a different vantage point and a recognition that resolution around the same themes can take very different paths. While for Shilpa certain aspects of the resolution involved keeping some things unresolved (putting them back in a box), for Sharanya resolution meant embracing a freedom to express one's body fully. At the same time, Shilpa was also able to see that despite the paths being different, shame still persisted, which landed them both on the floor in a heap, quite literally. Says Shilpa, "This was empowering for both of us—it helped me to connect with her process and yet stay objective about how she needed to do it, and it made it possible for her to freely explore 'my protagonist' through her experiences without feeling threatened." Thus, this is another example of how the mode of collaboration (in this case, role

sharing) directly contributes to the therapeutic benefit of the play to the ensemble members.

Conclusion

Our experience through *Positively Shameless* has demonstrated that therapeutic theatre has potential for continuity beyond its initial therapeutic goals. There seem to be two necessary and interrelated conditions for this. The first is flexibility, which allows the work to be fluid, responsive, and emergent; the second is a methodological framework, specific to the nature of the work, that provides a way of navigating the flexible nature without compromising integrity. Both these conditions are contingent on collaboration. For *PS*, receiving invitations to perform catalyzed the need to re-explore the play, and, consequently, our process. This in turn has led to the play having ongoing relevance to audiences as well. *PS* is testimony to the potential of a collaborative artistic process in facilitating ongoing therapeutic benefit outside the bounds of conventional goal-oriented psychotherapy. Growing mental health needs, coupled with structural limitations of individual therapy, makes such spaces and processes increasingly important to create and sustain.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the genesis and process of creation of the play, see Maitri Gopalakrishna and Shabari Rao, "Performance, Revelation and Resistance: Interweaving the Artistic and the Therapeutic in Devised Theatre," *Indian Theatre Journal* 1, no. 1 (April 2017): 83–90.

2. Attilio Favorini, "Some Memory Plays before the 'Memory Play,'" *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 29–50; John Brockway Schmor, "Confessional Performance: Postmodern Culture in Recent American Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 157–74; Kent Neely et al., "Praxis: An Editorial Statement," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 175-210; Ryan M. Claycomb, "(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject and Progressive Politics," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 95–122.

3. Pendzik defines therapeutic theatre as a form of drama therapy that involves the development of a performance based on personal material, presented in front of an audience, and is conceived with a therapeutic aim. See Susana Pendzik, "The Self in Performance: Context, Definitions, Directions," in *The Self in Performance*, ed. Susana Pendzik, Renée Emunah, and David Read Johnson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 8.

4. Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, "The Self in Performance," 15.

5. J. A. Rubin, "Art Therapy: What It Is and What It Is Not," *American Journal of Art Therapy* 21, no. 2 (January 1982): 57–8.

6. Paolo J. Knill, "The Place of Beauty in Therapy and the Arts," *Arts in Psychotherapy* 22, no. 1 (1995): 1–7.

7. Lucy Lu and Felice Yuen, "Journey Women: Art Therapy in a Decolonizing Framework of Practice," *Arts in Psychotherapy* 39, no. 3 (July 2012): 192–200, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2011.12.007; Ian Parker, ed., *Handbook of Critical Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2015); Nisha Sajnani, "Response/Ability: Imagining a Critical Race Feminist Paradigm for the Creative Arts Therapies," *Arts in Psychotherapy* 39, no. 3 (July 2012): 186–91, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2011.12.009; Nisha Sajnani, Eva Marxen, and Rebecca Zarate, "Critical Perspectives in the Arts Therapies: Response/Ability across a Continuum of Practice," *Arts in Psychotherapy* 54 (July 2017): 28–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.01.007.

8. Sruti Bala, "Decolonising Theatre and Performance Studies: Tales from the Classroom," *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 20, no. 3 (September 2017): 333–45; Sruti Bala, *The Gestures of Participatory Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

9. Pendzik, Emunah, and Johnson, "The Self in Performance," 15.

10. Albert W. Dzur, "Democratic Professionalism: Sharing Authority in Civic Life," *The Good Society* 13, no. 1 (2004): 7.