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Presidential Faculty/Student Collaboration and Publication Grant

ORAL HISTORIES AND ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE THEATRE AT GUSTAVUS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE THEN AND NOW

THE PROJECT

The project that Leah Soule and I propose involves collecting, transcribing, and analyzing oral histories of key alumni of the Gustavus social justice theatre troupe, I Am We Are. We will ask alumni from various stages of the troupe’s twenty-year history to recall their experience with the company, and the discuss how that experience shaped their lives after graduation from Gustavus. We will draw from these interviews to sketch a coherent history of the troupe (with additional material to be filled in after the summer project ends), to identify salient patterns in the development of the troupe’s process, and to trace the lasting impact the troupe has had on its members and its audiences. This collaborative work will be presented at various times and in multiple formats, including a performance, a conference paper, a journal article, and a book project (see details below). On the eve of I Am We Are’s twentieth anniversary, this project will enable the troupe, the Department of Theatre and Dance, and the college fully to celebrate I Am We Are’s accomplishments and lasting legacy.

Social Justice Theatre is an emerging field of study in the academy and in the field of community organizing. Specific theatre techniques, including Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed structures, are used to teach, to empower, and to foster dialogue on difficult issues in a variety of communities around the world, including refugee camps, battered women’s shelters, prisons, and schools. Students at increasing numbers of colleges and universities have turned to social justice theatre as a means creatively to address troubling issues such as racism, sexual assault, and homophobia on their campuses. Hamline College, for example, announced in 2010 that it was launching “Making Waves: Social Justice Theatre Troupe” a group that, “uses the art of performance to provoke dialogue about race, gender, class and other issues that can threaten our diverse and collaborative community of learners” (Hamline website). Yet, the Gustavus social justice theatre troupe, I Am We Are, has been successfully producing such performances since 1995.

Each year, when my Gustavus students and I travel to the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conferences, colleagues flock to our sessions. They marvel at the longevity and success of the company, and applaud its central role in setting an inclusive tone for first-year students from the beginning of each year. They have many questions for us. How has the group survived for two decades? How has it been supported or sustained? What structures, techniques, and processes has it used to stay relevant and engaging for its student audiences? How has effective material been generated and how have difficult subjects been addressed? Have these processes changed over time? How does the troupe actually work, and when do structures need to be changed and
modified as audiences change? How has the community benefited from the work of I Am We Are? What do their audiences learn? What do the students learn from their involvement in the group? Where are those students now? How has social justice theatre influenced their lives and continued to influence them – as much as twenty years later?

Questions that stem from colleagues wanting to follow our example can be practical and specific. But many others want to explore the pedagogical and political meanings in I Am We Are’s workshops and performances. Questions we are still exploring include: How have we changed and adapted Boal’s original concepts of Theatre of the Oppressed? How can we incorporate new ideas about the importance of “the Bystander”? How can we represent intersectionality while still representing specific forms of oppression? How can theatre for social justice work to create sustainable change?

Discussions of these questions are of great interest to our own troupe, of course, but it would be invaluable to large numbers of educators and students, community leaders and organizers interested in harnessing the power of social justice theatre for their own constituents.

Leah Soule and I will research the context of I Am We Are’s work, by finding examples of other college-based, student-run troupes around the country. We will marshall a group of sources on Theatre of the Oppressed and theatre for social justice to become even more familiar with techniques and controversies as they are being discussed among academics and practitioners. Armed with this background, we will refine a group of questions we wish to ask alumni that will evoke the points we wish to cover. We will, however, be open to random reminiscences, and always ready to discover unexpected insights. We will both reach out to alumni across the country and ask for permission to interview them on video. Several alumni have already agreed to participate.

We will travel to meet alumni who are local or invite them to visit us on campus. We hope to travel to other parts of the country when necessary to interview a crucial alum. After transcribing sections of these interviews, Leah and I will look for recurring themes, trends, patterns and paradigm shifts. We will then return to the interviews, and conduct additional interviews in order to support or contradict our analysis. By summer’s end, we will have chosen a limited number of themes and conclusions to present as part of the anniversary celebration. We hope to interview additional alumni who attend the anniversary as well. By the following summer, we will have a conference paper prepared.

**PUBLICATION**

The results of our collaborative research will be published at several stages and in several venues. First, the performance material and basic history we gather will be core elements in a series of performances this coming November in Anderson Theatre. Materials we gather for this production will be added to I Am We Are’s archive, and will be of lasting benefit to the troupe and its audiences.

Next, Leah and I will return to the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed conference, at which we presented last year, to give a collaboratively written paper on our research
findings. The conference paper will incorporate Leah’s thesis work on “intersectionality”. It will focus on the ways in which I Am We Are has worked over the years to acknowledge the intersections among such injustices as sexism, racism, homophobia, poverty, climate change and other issues they have performed about. We will look at the development of the company’s awareness of these intersections, and the ways in which that awareness was incorporated into performances and group process. The conference takes place in June of 2016. Leah and I intend to reshape the conference paper into an article for submission to an academic theatre journal. Depending on Leah’s thesis schedule, this article will be submitted in the spring or summer of 2016.

The summer of 2015 is a crucial time for Leah, in preparation for her thesis, and for I Am We Are, in preparation for the Twentieth Anniversary. The opportunity to spend a significant part of the summer researching, analyzing, and editing this project would represent a significant contribution to the success of both the thesis and the reunion event. This collaboration would also enable a successful January term course in which a digital element would be added to the dissemination of our findings and the additional research by students in the course.

There are at least two hundred alumni of I Am We Are. We are currently in touch with about one hundred and thirteen. Leah and I would choose a manageable number of alumni from across the years for the summer collaborative, being sure that our choices represented a range of backgrounds and experiences. In the longer term, however, we plan larger book project about I Am We Are. This book will address the wider need for a text that provides an in-depth view of the workings of social justice theatre troupe on a college campus. Leah will stay involved with this project after graduation, and I expect a number of other students and alumni will make contributions. Depending on my schedule and the amount of support available to me, I hope to complete this project by Fall, 2016

A couple of quick case studies:

Julia Tindell (GAC ’13) remembers vividly her very first experience as a member of I Am We Are. She participated in researching, developing, and acting in the group’s performance about human trafficking for I Am Not for Sale: Slavery Past and Present, the 2011 Building Bridges Conference. In between the conference and the career, it was Julia’s ongoing involvement with I Am We Are, in connection with her major in Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at Gustavus, that helped shape her idealism into action. Supported by the troupe, Julia wrote, rehearsed, organized and performed material on a wide range of issues. Today, Julia works full time for Breaking Free, a Minnesota-based non-profit that strives to educate the community and support the victims of sex trafficking. Her time with I Am We Are, Julia asserts, gave her the tools and the confidence to make a real difference in the world.

Elizabeth Coco (GAC ’12), a core member of I Am We Are, and a co-chair of Building Bridges when a student at Gustavus, now works as the VISTA Coordinator for the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits. She inspired the students currently taking the “Boal and Beyond” course by talking pragmatically about strategies and tactics in social justice work. She gave life to the seemingly abstract concept of “intersectionality” and frankly shared the ways in which she negotiated her whiteness as a social justice advocate. The students listened hungrily to her stories.
BIOS AND CAREER TRAJECTORIES

LEAH SOULE

Leah is a junior Gender, Women, Sexuality Studies major, with minors in Peace Studies and Social Justice Theatre. She joined I Am We Are as a first-year student, and has participated in numerous shows and workshops with the troupe, including E Pluribus Gustavus. In Fall, 2013, Leah participated in the Focus on Justice, Peace and Development semester in Bangalore, India. While there, she gained a deeper understanding of structural injustice and resistance to this injustice by traveling through the country and talking to members and activists from marginalized communities. While in India, she co-planned and facilitated four Theatre of the Oppressed-based workshops for her program. She presented a paper on that experience at the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference in June, 2014. In Spring, 2014, Leah was the coordinator of the I Am We Are Workshop group, which planned and presented workshops to classes and campus organizations throughout the semester.

Leah is currently Co-Chair of the Building Bridges Conference, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Recognizing and Rejecting Rape Culture.”

FROM LEAH:

I am writing today to apply for funding to research and document oral history of the twenty year old Gustavus Social Justice Theater Troupe, I Am We Are. This summer, Amy Seham and I would reach out to alumni of I Am We Are and conduct and transcribe interviews. These interviews would focus on the experience of members while they participated in the group and how their participation affected them after leaving Gustavus. For those who continued in the work of Social Justice, we will gather thoughts on major social justice concepts such as intersectionality and solidarity and how theater can be used to create sustainable change. We anticipate using these interviews to craft a paper that would guide others in the field of social justice theater, in how to sustain groups like I Am We Are, which is unique in its existence. These interviews will also be incorporated into the I Am We Are anniversary performance and gala in the fall of 2015.

As a student focused in social justice I believe that this project would provide me with an amazing opportunity to connect with people working in my field and learn from their lived experience of working for social change. This would give me an opportunity to connect directly with people working on or committed to a diverse group of issues and in many different ways. It would also give me the opportunity to learn what has sustained folks in doing this type of work, since “burning out” is a serious consideration of those who commit to working on social justice issues. In these interviews I also hope to track a theme of intersectionality (or the intersecting of identity’s), which I plan to focus my thesis on next year. Finally these interviews would also provide me a large network to draw upon after graduation next year. I know that by getting the opportunity to reach out to my I Am We Are family, I would gain a deeper understanding of the challenges of social justice work and the advantages of theater for social justice work.
AMY SEHAM

Amy is a Professor of Theatre and Dance at Gustavus Adolphus College, where she has taught since 1997. She has a BA from Wesleyan University, an MFA from Northwestern University and a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her dissertation on Race and Gender in Chicago Improv-Comedy was published as a book, *Whose Improv Is It, Anyway?* (U Mississippi P, 2001) and she has presented conference papers and workshops at the Association of Theatre for Higher Education, the American Society for Theatre Research, and the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Conference on a very regular basis. Her original plays have been produced in New Haven, New York, Los Angeles, and at the Minneapolis Fringe Festival. She has been involved as an advisor to I Am We Are for 18 of its 20 years of existence.

CAREER TRAJECTORY

My dissertation on race and gender in Chicago improv was based on my analysis of multiple interviews and oral histories of working improvisers. I enjoy taking these personal stories and finding ways to synthesize their meanings into a coherent narrative. Ever since the publication of my book about stereotypes and power plays in improv comedy, I have been asked to write more about the possibilities for inclusive and meaningful student-created theatre. In my years with I Am We Are, I have done creative research on that very question. The time has come to share some of that research through publication.

I have honed my interest in social justice theatre to the point of spear-heading a change in the mission of the Department of Theatre and Dance, so that we are now dedicated to creating performance that works for social change and personal transformation. The 20th Anniversary of I Am We Are, fully supported by our department, is a unique opportunity for me, in collaboration with Leah, to approach and talk with alumni of that troupe with the goal of synthesizing, analyzing and ultimately sharing the stories of its long, eventful existence. I cannot think of anyone I would enjoy collaborating with more than Leah Soule. She is dedicated not only to doing social justice theatre, but also to thinking deeply about the way it works and why. With her fresh perspective and my long experience, I believe we can create an important documentary and a valuable interpretation of the meanings of I Am We Are's journey. This is a history worth writing and sharing with the world.