

# PERFORMING RESEARCH: CONTEMPLATING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A 'MAN'

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## ABSTRACT:

Sharing research in performative modes opens new possibilities for meaning making. This article offers a monologue that explores my experience of working on a theatre project with military veterans. The impact of working on the creative process with veterans inspired this performed piece, and provided an opportunity to contemplate what it means to be a 'man' in today's society. The article first situates performed research within current arts-based literature prior to sharing the creative piece, which is at the heart of this offering. The piece then concludes with how performed research opens the possibility for different forms of engagement and reflection for audiences.

## BIO:

George Belliveau is Professor of theatre education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. His research focuses on research-based theatre and performed research. He has published extensively in the areas of theatre & drama education and arts-based research. His latest co-edited book *Research-based Theatre: An Artistic Methodology* (Intellect, 2016) explores a variety of international projects that use theatre to examine social issues. He is a professionally trained actor, and has participated in over 100 theatre productions as an actor, director, or playwright. His recent piece *Contact!Unload*, co-developed with military veterans, artists and counselors, has been performed for a variety of audiences, including politicians at Canada's Parliament in Ottawa and for Prince Harry in London, UK. He has received a number of awards for his scholarship and was recently inducted into the College of the Royal Society of Canada (2017).

Good critical arts-based research grasps our imaginations, grabs a hold of our souls, and unabashedly strives to affect our very ways of living, being and co-being ... [and is] deliberately transformative and inspires us to reflection ...

- Susan Finley, 2014, p. 531

As arts-based researchers we thrive to *inspire* and *grab hold of souls*, and we do so through the playful weaving of text, body, and *spirit* within our diverse artistic practices. This spirit often rests within complex relationships that unfold amidst the colour and movement of the research experience (Douglas & Carless, 2013). As an artist-researcher, I pay close attention to this spirit and am "present to the possibilities and potentialities that exist at the intersections of the artistic and contemplative" (Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015, p. 1).

Peter Brook's (1968) influential work in the theatre emphasizes how the artist must keep the art-making buoyant and alive, for when we cease to do so, it turns into the *deadly theatre*. According to Brook, theatre that relies too heavily on being complete or set loses its vitality. The dramatic monologue I share below represents my quest to show the ongoing impact of a collaborative theatre-based project. Based on a four-year initiative where I worked closely with counselors and returning military veterans (Belliveau, 2017; Lea, Belliveau & Westwood, 2018), the monologue explores how the theatre collaboration continues to live inside

me and to influence who I am as an artist-researcher and human being.

In developing the monologue, I reached beyond the intellectual and aimed to offer a visceral depiction of my discoveries. Through the physical and poetic, I aimed to translate and expand academic understandings to include embodied and artistic ways of knowing. The affordances of arts-infused forms of contemplation are that they provide the possibility to explore what we don't know that we don't know. Working within performative modes of inquiry, such as monologues, can often surprise and spark artist-researchers towards new insights. As Philip Gerard (2017) describes, "It's the *not* knowing that always gets me, the surprise waiting at the end of the road" (p. xii).

The reflective and creative writing process allowed space for learning moments that I didn't know I had experienced during the veterans project. Engaging with a poetic monologue through body and voice pushed me to uncover and reveal moments I had been previously unable to articulate or identify, similar to Lyotard's (1992) notion of the "unthought," where things are muddled up, and we try to make sense of it all through a creative process (p. 103). Rehearsing the monologue and putting it on its feet offered further opportunities to understand, feel, and appreciate the impact of this work with new lenses (Belliveau, 2015a).

### **What does it mean to be a 'man'**

*As a father of two girls, a husband, a son, a brother, and most recently working with military men, I have been wondering what it means to be a man?*

*What does it mean to be a successful, decent man?  
Who are our models? Who are your models?*

*For the first two decades of my life I identified as a hockey player.  
In the dressing room, I was surrounded by hyper-masculinity.  
On the ice, it was about being tough and strong in a fast, physical game with other men.  
I dreamed of being a goalie in the NHL.  
I wanted to be Ken Dryden, because he was an athlete and a scholar.*

*Well, I didn't make it to the NHL, but I managed to play at the University level, where I traveled from hockey to theatre dressing room while majoring in Acting at Dalhousie University.*

*At the age of 18, as I made my way between those two drastically different worlds, I realized there was a spectrum of men, and how performing masculinity is part of a continuum.  
I enjoyed the camaraderie of my hockey teammates,  
But with my male acting friends I felt more alive.  
I explored parts of myself that I never knew existed – as they were locked up, hidden.  
I expanded my range, I felt more complete in the theatre.*

*So, in second year university I decided to hang up my hockey gear and commit myself fully to theatre.*

*Much to my father's surprise ... and I suspect chagrin.*

*My brother Don got it, because at that point in his life he put aside weight lifting and football to seek a more spiritual pathway by mountain climbing, from the Canadian Rockies to the Himalayas.*

*But dad, well ...*

*To be a man is to play hockey.*

*To be a man is to be strong, tough, and reserve one's emotions.*

*To be a man is not to open oneself up and be vulnerable in front of others.*

*I now work with military veterans, men in particular, who were deployed overseas by the Canadian Forces to be peacekeepers, to protect innocent civilians caught in warfare.*

*These men, who risk their lives to safeguard the wellbeing of others, represent for many of us the epitome of being a man.*

*In my three years of working with these veterans*

*I have come to recognize the layers and levels of what it means to be a man.*

*Being a man goes much deeper than the bravado, the uniform, and physical strength.*

*These men I work with have faced moral and psychological injuries that most of us will never encounter.*

*Imagine ... deciding if you should shoot a six-year-old Afghan boy who is walking alone towards your compound, because he might be carrying explosive devices?*

*Or ... holding on to your mate's shrapnel-filled body, as he takes in his last breath ... then a few weeks later having to let his parents know that at 19 ... their son was mature beyond his years.*

*The veterans I work with have journeyed from war zones to counseling support, and now theatre where they perform their lived experiences of Afghanistan in our play called Contact!Unload.*

*The play depicts their authentic stories of loss, survivor's guilt, but it also shows the camaraderie and brotherhood, as they find ways within the group to heal, to cope, to reclaim parts of their souls.*

*Souls that were fractured, or left overseas.*

*As one of the vets says: "You gotta die when you join, so you don't fear dying when you're there."*

*The challenge is when you come back, it's not easy to reclaim your life.*

*"Nothing's the same here.*

*Nothing makes sense.  
When I was there I was something.  
When I'm here I'm just dead inside."*

*Our theatre piece shows the hurt, pain, the inner struggles.  
But it also brings to life pathways towards healing, towards recovery.*

*The scars remain, yet ways of dealing and coping emerge as the play unfolds.  
It's about transitioning, reclaiming, confronting the past to move forward.*

*Theatre allows us to juxtapose past and present, bringing to light a change  
process in front of our eyes.  
In Contact! Unload we witness hyper-masculine men, initially defying any kind of  
support.  
"I'm fucked up, but not that fucked up."  
Or, "there are guys that are way worse than I am."*

*With persistent persuasion from fellow vets, they eventually seek professional  
support, and open up in an attempt to literally save their lives.*

*In getting to know these veterans, by working closely with them in rehearsals, I  
... was in awe ... witnessing another definition of courage.*

*Courage to be vulnerable, courage to share their humanity, honesty, as right in  
front of me they re-lived their trauma, opening up their shattered souls ... then,  
painfully, courageously worked at stitching the broken pieces back together, so  
they could live more fully.*

*So, what does it mean to be a man? A father? A son? A brother?*

*I never served in the military, so what did I really know about their trauma?  
The only weapon I ever held was a prop, a wooden sword in a Shakespeare battle  
scene.  
And I guess a hockey stick ... but something was happening inside me, as I  
watched them first hand rebuild themselves, reclaim their souls, in the company of  
their brothers.  
I realized that I was grappling with my own identity, as a male, as a father, a son.*

*My dad grew up on a farm; he was a hockey player, a boxer, a weightlifter.  
At age 18, he could bench press nearly 300 pounds (that's twice my weight!)  
Dad's now 74, and when we move furniture, he still picks up the heavy end.  
Though, when Dad was 49, the age I am now, he lost a son, my brother, Don, in a  
tragic mountain climbing accident.  
I was 27, and I had no idea how to grieve for my only brother, a best friend.  
My father, in his quiet way, showed me another way to be strong.  
He stood beside me, and with compassion, we grieved and cried together.*

*Releasing, and sharing the burden of our deep loss.*

*Never alone, never alone – that’s the motto for the veterans I work with.  
I have your back.  
On the battlefield, and at home.*

*My dad saw the production of Contact!Unload, and like many other men (and women) in attendance, his eyes were filled with tears during the curtain call as these soldiers stood side by side, hugging, singing “Lean on Me.”*

*Men do cry,  
And they laugh.  
In fact, they have the spectrum of emotions at their disposal.  
They just need the courage to act upon and release these emotions.  
So, what does it mean to be a man?  
It’s being true ... to yourself and those around you.*

The monologue purposefully shifts from past to present, personal to public, never settling on time or place for very long. In offering only brief descriptive moments, audiences are given the chance to imagine and complete the narrative for themselves. Spiraling within the text and performance is a purposely built-in rhythm or interplay between the inner and outer world. This creative space invites audiences to enter the narrative with their own story, their own quest for understanding. Therefore the experience for the audience is to first witness the meaning making that I encountered in working closely with the veterans, followed with an opportunity to contemplate their own lived experiences of loss and trauma. As the monologue shifts between the stories of veterans and my lived experience, a porous space is generated for witnesses to imaginatively insert and/or contemplate their own narratives. This offering or gifting (Lea, 2014) allows for stories to live on, transform, and take on new meanings for the receivers, thus maintaining Brook’s notion of vitality, and the concept of being *present* with stories, which characterizes a key concept of arts-based and contemplative practices. However, the present never stands still. It is always alive, in flux, in transformation. We are constantly in the midst of a journey, while yearning to hold on to, or make sense of, an ephemeral present.

In contemplating her theatre monologues around identity and being present, artist-researcher Margi Brown Ash (2018) suggests that performing “stories have the power to change how we are in the world” (p. 5). Through the act of performing one’s research, in lifting it off the page into a three-dimensional space, Brown Ash adds that we

*inspire, contextualise, and embody the stories being told and in so doing connect in multiple ways to the audience. Just as the shaman bridges the gap between soul and earth, so the performer journeys on behalf of their audience, towards an embodied, emotional, and empathic understanding of what it is to be human. (p. 5)*

Irish playwright Oscar Wilde regarded theatre as “the greatest of all art forms, the most

immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being" (quoted in Ellmann, 1988, p. 111). When sharing performance-based research, one hopes to inspire and awaken the audience, so that they leave the space more alive and present than when they entered. To date, the monologue "What does it mean to be a 'man' " has been performed for over a thousand people at four public events. Anecdotal feedback after performances, along with written messages, suggest the monologue has struck a chord with audiences and enabled them to reflect on their lives. Written comments include, "heartwarming," "authentic, beautifully honest," "all men need to see this, so they can connect to their emotions," "spoke directly to my losses in life, yet in a hopeful way."

As an artist-researcher, I keep striving to bring scholarly and artistic understandings to my work in an attempt to *inspire*, and *grab hold of souls* through forms of public engagement and monologues:

*In my academic, researcher role I strive for clarity. I aim to persuade through argument, provide evidence and support. I anchor my work in ongoing debates, theories, methodologies, ideally contributing new knowledge.*

*When performing I layer, complicate, I get partially lost, in the world of the drama. I'm in the moment, prepared spontaneity. Hamlet-like I ponder, contemplate, debate with myself. I raise the stakes, make the problem colossal yet minute, worldly yet personal. I'm here **and** there.*

*My academic side troubles, makes stabs, seeks truth, considers the literature, the field. I strive to say something new.*

*I strive to be physically and emotionally present, fully alive, awake. To dream.*

*I observe, analyze, synthesize. I study the trees and seek to organize them in some coherent or artful forest.*

*I walk in the forest. I'm part of the forest, touch the trees, smell nature, breathe in the colours.*

*I climb the trees for a better view, dwell in the forest. Amidst the doing I begin to paint meanings. Sketches, blotches in time.*

*Time and space are transformed, intensified. I'm here and there.*

*There, in the myriads of strands, I capture, no, I create meaning through prose.*

*And poetry. It's this and that.*

*I write. I re-write.*

*I create. I re-create.*

*I generate.*

*I present.*

*I perform.*

(Belliveau, 2015b, p. 3)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Watch the monologue at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogIhkBI94Yg>

<sup>2</sup>The events include: Vancouver Public Salon, Vancouver Playhouse, BC (Nov. 2017); The Flame storytelling, Bistro Cottage, Vancouver, BC (May 2017); *Contact!Unload* Symposium, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC (May 2017); Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, Vancouver, BC (March 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Used with permission from individuals who sent personal comments via e-mail or text.

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