

Interviews with Cassie Sim and Richard Huber about their play, *Fluids, Bodily*: When the script fragments and instinct guide the way

The two interviews tell the story of the way the natural instincts of a creative young playwright guide her through the process of recovery from traumatic childhood experiences. Yesim Sokmen interviewed Cassie Sim, playwright and director of *Fluids, Bodily* and Richard Huber, the co-director and Sim's mentor. Sim and Huber also explain how they approached this sensitive material in a safe manner and transformed it into an aesthetic creation for stage performance. The factors that contribute to healing and transformation are examined. *Fluids, Bodily* was performed as part of the Lunchtime Theatre Programme which is organised by the Theatre Studies department at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Sim's play is about her experiences of childhood abuse.

Keywords

Dramatherapy, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), abuse, sexual abuse, trauma, arts therapy

Whenever illness is associated with loss of soul, the arts emerge spontaneously as remedies, soul medicine (McNiff, 1992, p.1).

Introduction

I had the privilege of knowing Cassie Sim through my work as an occupational therapist last year. When Cassie told me what her new play was about, I was curious to learn more about her process of reclaiming her wellness. I thought that her courageous initiative to undertake the creation of a play dealing with her trauma experiences during her recovery could offer new insights to me as a student in arts therapy, as well as to the arts therapy community.

I met with Cassie on 15 April 2014 at the University of Otago campus in Dunedin, New Zealand where her play, *Fluids, Bodily*, was being performed as part of the Lunchtime Theatre programme organised by the Theatre Studies department. Cassie co-directed the play with Richard Huber whom I interviewed the following day. Cassie kindly agreed to talk with me about her experience of writing, directing, and watching her own play so that I could share it with the wider arts therapy community. Cassie's play is about her experiences of childhood abuse.

Interview with Cassie Sim

Yesim Sokmen: Hello Cassie, thank you for making time to talk to me about your play, *Fluids, Bodily*. Can you tell me about your background and how your play came to life?

Cassie Sim: Hi Yesim. I have studied Theatre at the University of Otago and have previously written plays for their Lunchtime Theatre programme. For me writing is a way of expressing something that is very personal, with the artistic liberties drama provides. The initial script was written for a playwriting paper, but after a period of struggling with some symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the script became much more focused and part of my healing and recovery process.

The first draft that I wrote for the playwriting paper came out all fragmented. I was given an A+ for the draft, but after having gone through a period of being unwell, I returned to the piece and I decided it didn't directly represent the reality of my situation, which is what I ultimately wanted to present. I sifted through the first draft and identified the common themes of PTSD symptoms and references to childhood abuse. At the time I wrote it, it was very raw and thus authentic. I didn't want to change that. I wanted there to

be an honesty to the piece. The final draft was written in December 2013 and then performed in April 2014.

During the time of production and rehearsals leading up to the performance I was still recovering. But even during this difficult period of my life I was still able to focus and in fact a lot of these struggles were incorporated into the performance. My creativity during this time was heightened. The whole process of creating this play allowed me to focus on something outside of myself. The play then became something more than myself and my experiences and I realised how powerful the themes were and how other people could relate to them.

The style of the piece is postdramatic, a contemporary way of writing theatre. The play is comprised of four voices, each performed by a different actor, to represent one experience or character as a whole. Each voice is a facet of my own experience of PTSD and the different conflicts that arose during my journey of understanding the symptoms, how to manage them and my work with mental health services.

YS: *The creation of the play and your journey in mental health services happened at the same time. How do they tie together for you?*

CS: They tie together in the sense that as I gained strength in the treatment I received, I also gained the strength and acceptance to be able to share my experiences in a public forum. I was seeing a psychologist who knew I was producing a play and he really gave me the confidence and the tools to accomplish something that I probably wouldn't have thought I was able to do. There is also conflict in the script when the psychiatric terminology is juxtaposed against the personal experience of PTSD.

YS: *Can you tell me about the title of the play?*

CS: The title *Fluids, Bodily* is a part of a larger sentence in the play: "Fluids, from the body. The incessant sting left to swelter through time". It basically sums up one of the larger themes of the play in a metaphorical way. The idea that going through trauma as a child leaves an imprint on your body and certain situations or sensations can trigger emotions and thoughts uncontrollable to you.

YS: *During the creation process what resources did you use and how did they contribute?*

CS: I co-directed with Richard who I had worked with previously. It was helpful working with someone who had a lot of experience in theatre and also knew me personally and what I was and had been going through. He kept me on track and was very positive about the piece. He allowed me a lot of freedom for what I was trying to communicate. Due to the subject matter, it was important not to worry about potential criticism, so his support and expertise were vital for me to feel confident in what I was doing.

I had four female actors and my first priority was to make sure they felt comfortable with the script. It was rated R18 for a reason. They were very supportive and understanding because to explain the script to them I had to talk about personal things.

YS: *How was it for you to watch the production performed?*

CS: Throughout the rehearsal process I had detached myself from the words in the script to be able to direct it. When the first public performance happened, I think that was the first time it hit me how real and deeply moving it was. I also felt happy at the same time for what I had created. So, basically, I felt a mix of emotions.

YS: *There were three performances. Did you notice differences between them?*

CS: The actors got stronger with each performance as they were feeding from the energy of the audience as well. The first performance was probably a little bit more sad and emotional to watch because the actors seemed so vulnerable. By the end they were strong and clear in what they were saying. It was a different feeling.

YS: *It must take a lot of courage to let the public see your experience portrayed. Often we want to be seen but, paradoxically, at the same time we don't want to be seen...*

CS: Yes. The script actually deals with that. There are references about how desperate you can be in your pain and you feel you want to

tell people but it's hard because childhood abuse is so difficult to talk about. You feel ashamed or embarrassed, all of those sorts of feelings. Silence can keep you in a horrible space. I felt very safe creating this play because of the support I had. I didn't want to hide anything any more. By being open about it and using my pain in a creative way, it felt like my first real step to healing.

A big theme that I wanted to get across was that any sort of abuse in childhood is not just something that happened; it is something that is happening to you. It feels like a permanent scar. I am using it in a positive way through art. In talking with the actors they said they never thought of it that way. They thought it was an event that you move on from. But that's not the case. Memories are not something you can switch off.

YS: *That brings up the question of what we mean by 'moving on' doesn't it?*

CS: Yes. My psychologist said it is almost like you are turning back and looking instead of running away from it. That is what I am doing, turning around, stopping and looking at everything.

YS: *Looking at yourself from the outside, if you compared yourself now with how you were before the play, what do you see differently? Has something changed?*

CS: I feel like some part of me has been released. I had this incredible urge to free something from me that I didn't want to have inside the whole time. Like a heaviness inside of me that I needed to physically remove. By doing that, after the play, there were a lot of emotions that were able to be reconciled. Memories no longer had strong emotions attached to them. Do you know what I mean?

YS: *Is it like they lost their power?*

CS: Yes. They lost a bit of their power. In creating something tangible, embodying personal thoughts and memories into words and a performance, they became expressions rather than a day-by-day reality. Also, realising that none of these things, mental illness and childhood abuse, defines you as a person felt very liberating.

YS: *How did the audience respond to the play?*

CS: There were mixed reactions, a lot of people weren't sure what to say. The general feeling amongst the audience was almost a state of shock because it was such a powerful script and powerful theme that they probably weren't expecting. Someone said 'I don't know what you're doing but keep doing it'. I had expected a mixed reaction.

YS: *What are your thoughts about the future?*

CS: I am still writing. Writing plays is the artform which I want to express myself through. I am always writing about my personal journey. If I wasn't, I don't think I would continue writing. A play that I am writing at the moment is all about what happens beyond recovery and how my experiences manifest and affect everyday living. The play is focussed on how difficult childhood experiences can affect an adult's sexuality. It's called 'Muted-tickle'.

YS: *How about Fluids, Bodily. What will happen to it?*

CS: The theatre staff here suggested I put it in the Otago Fringe Festival. I would like it to reach more people as, since the performance, people have contacted me expressing their appreciation of the play, due to their own personal histories and experiences. It is something that is not often talked about publicly but I feel that if I can have the courage to speak about it through art, that is one step in the right direction.

YS: *Thank you very much, Cassie, for your time and for sharing your experiences with me and the readers.*

Interview with Richard Huber

Cassie encouraged me to talk to Richard Huber, her mentor and the co-director of the play. This is a summary of his views about Cassie and the process:

Richard Huber: Cassie has got a very strong instinct, whether you call that creating or doing something with life. Her idea to make the piece aesthetically beautiful provided a dialectical experience between the material and how it is



presented. It showed where she sat in relationship with the material.

In terms of the style, we had long discussions about how to deal with the sensitive nature of the material and how to deal with the actors in relationship with that, but also herself, to see if she was okay.

I think that given the nature of the material, she needed to approach it indirectly.

For instance, I thought that she could not ask the actors to try and embody her realistically. The mind processes a lot of the experience in an indirect way, through metaphor and images. This would leave the actors in a safer space. By not asking the actors to personalise it to the extent that it became them, that it could be Cassie's, it could be the audience's and it could be more.

I thought it was a very successful piece of theatre because it opened you up if you allowed yourself into the layers of it. It doesn't finish when you watch it, it keeps on going.

Conclusion

A couple of months later, in an email, I asked Cassie about the healing aspects of the process of *Fluids, Bodily*. She wrote to me: "I am pretty well recovered now! So looking back on it is quite surreal."

Lubin and Johnson (2008) state that "trauma is meaningless; it is the process of recovery that generates meaning" (p.79). Gersie (1997) discusses the value

From Top:

Figure 1: Martyn Roberts, *Fluids, Bodily*, digital photograph, 2256 x 1496mm.

Figure 2: Martyn Roberts, *Fluids, Bodily*, digital photograph, 2256 x 1496mm.

Figure 3: Martyn Roberts, *Fluids, Bodily*, digital photograph, 2256 x 1496mm.

Figure 4: Martyn Roberts, *Fluids, Bodily*, digital photograph, 2256 x 1496mm.

of telling personal stories in a safe therapeutic context to heal from difficult life experiences. Consistent with Gersie's views, Cassie's natural drive to write and direct a theatre piece about her experience has allowed her to work through the trauma material in a context where she is actively in charge. Cassie chose the language with which she is most comfortable expressing herself, that is, the language of postdramatic theatre. The aesthetic and metaphorical aspects of the piece, as Richard explained, served to provide safety both for Cassie and for the audience. This, in turn, has provided a safe and supported space for her to give new meaning to her past experiences, connect with an audience, and allow her to transcend past experiences. From my point of view as a witness, I found that the artistic features of the play allowed me to connect with Cassie's experience and be deeply touched.

According to Malchiodi (2012), art expression helps the treatment of PTSD by reconnecting implicit (sensory) and explicit (declarative) memories of trauma. Emunah (1994, p.43) discusses two healing dimensions of drama that Cassie mentioned in her interview:

1. The rich multi-sensory language of drama circumvents the distancing from the trauma material (such as by intellectualisation or suppression) and integrates sensation, emotion and cognition.
2. Sharing one's internal world with a witnessing audience creates a feeling as if an inner weight is removed, a burden is lifted. Emunah (1994) concludes that "This often leads to an experience of intense acceptance and forgiveness" (p.43).

According to Cassie, the public performance aspect helped to break the vicious cycle of silence and shame. Lubin and Johnson (2008), emphasise the power of connection with caring witnesses in trauma recovery: "It is the presence of the witness that allows your suffering to be mourned, your strength to survive honoured" (p.80).

Both the process of creation of this play, and the play itself illustrate the journey from

the fragmentation caused by PTSD towards integration and liberation. There seem to be three factors that have enabled this outcome. The first is Cassie's courage to raise her voice and express herself publicly through the clarity and safety provided by the art-form of her choice. The second is the support of her social environment in this process. And the third is the power of being witnessed.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely thankful to Cassie Sim and Richard Huber for generously sharing their experiences and time with me. Cassie Sim also helped me to edit the first two drafts, which was incredibly helpful in maintaining the authenticity of her account. I am also grateful to Amanda Levey (AThR) and Maree Brogden (AThR) for their very useful advice and mentoring, which provided me great assistance in writing this article. I would like to extend my special thanks to James Macandrew (OT), my supervisor, for his encouragement and support, and for his editing of this article. I owe thanks to Martyn Roberts for the beautiful photographs of the performance.

References

- Emunah, R. (1994). *Acting for real: Drama therapy process, technique, and performance*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Gersie, A. (1997). Beyond the story of one's life. In A. Gersie (Ed.), *Reflections on therapeutic story making: The use of stories in groups* (pp.197-222). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Lubin, H., & Johnson, D.R. (2008). *Trauma-centred group psychotherapy for women: A clinician's manual*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Malchiodi, C. A. (2012). Art therapy and the brain. In C. Malchiodi (Ed.), *Handbook of art therapy* (2nd ed.) (pp.17-25). New York: Guilford Press.
- McNiff, S. (1992). *Art as medicine: Creating a therapy of the imagination*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.