Transcendence: An Elegy to Transgenerational Systematic Adaptation

Nicholas Struck
Western Kentucky University, nicholas.struck671@topper.wku.edu

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TRANSCENDENCE: AN ELEGY TO TRANSGENERATIONAL SYSTEMATIC ADAPTATION

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Bachelor of Fine Arts with
Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
Nicholas C. Struck

Western Kentucky University
2019

CE/T Committee:
Professor Dr. Michelle Dvoskin, Advisor
Professor Jessica Johnson-Frohling
Professor Dr. Christopher Keller

Approved by
Advisor
Department of Theatre & Dance
ABSTRACT

When major tragedy occurs, it tends to strike grief in the minds and hearts of people throughout the world. When we engage in conversation about our individual vulnerabilities, we discover a realistic, but often beautiful mundaneness to life that is often lost. Channeling the mundane into art and community helps us to better understand the nuances of humanity. This gives the opportunity for us to connect through storytelling—using narrative as an outlet to express our feelings of grief, hope, and sacrifice.

This project is a devised performance piece that explores how tragedy affects community, how people respond to major tragic events intergenerationally, and how society adapts to that response. Using the events of September 11, 2001 as a storytelling foundation, the piece stages stories—collected through interviews—and is interspersed with personal narrative, unscripted discussion, and music to build on the relationship between community and tragedy from a transgenerational perspective. This project looks through a transgenerational lens to discover the effects of collective trauma on society. The members of the ensemble investigate identity through individual and broadened perspectives to create a holistic view of what it means to be a human affected by tragedy.

Keywords: Systematic Adaptation, Tragedy, Communal Trauma, Collective Trauma, Community, Community Building, Theatre Performance, Identity, Storytelling
To my transcendent friends, family, ensemble, and community for creating art and telling stories.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of an ensemble is not exclusive to theatre, at least I would like to think. The ensemble is an entity in which collaboration, risk, and sometimes insanity ensues. Most importantly, however, at the heart of the word is community. My first thank you is to the WKU Mahurin Honors College for accepting and embracing me into the Honors College my sophomore year, challenging me to pursue ambitious project after ambitious project, and providing the means for me to create without inhibition on this Capstone. I would also like to address the Honors Development Grant for allowing me the opportunity to travel to New York for research and study.

Working on this project alone would have been isolating, yes, but also selfish. The stories I was able to collect and the stories I was able to help tell in this process is unfathomably special. At the beginning of this project, when it was a mere vision in my head that had its home on a stage, I felt everything from being overwhelmed with doubt to being overwhelmed with support. I stepped into Dr. Michelle Dvoskin’s office, telling her I had an idea, to which she probably so knowingly responded, “Oh no.” It wasn’t long after I explained myself that she became my advisor on this project and has stuck by me through every new crazy idea and ambition and careful concern, so in turn I extend a deep thank you to her and her support and all the snacks in moments of stress.

Following that exchange, I began to describe my ideas—inarticulately, but nevertheless with words—to my best friend and roommate, Hilarie Spangler. With a sharp smile that I knew indicated wheels turning in her head, she immediately engaged with the idea and ever since we have been furiously sprinting a lifelong marathon of artistic pursuits.
together. Thank you, Hilarie, for being my rock and my inspiration everyday (along with the cats). I also could not have completed this project without my right hand, stage manager, and Steve Irwin-extraordinaire, Jacey Fears. You have held the reins in this process, seeing only short of what cannot be seen, but most importantly, you have been my accomplice and best friend.

I must also thank my people in the Theatre & Dance Department: my second-reader Jessica Johnson-Frohling, WKU Theatre & Dance Department Head Dr. David Young, my academic advisor Scott Stroot—who all have insightfully listened and watch me run wild with ambition, not only on this project, but in my college career. Beyond that, I thank the office of Study Abroad & Global Learning, and the Student Representatives, for giving another family for me to embrace. Without SAGL, life might be a little less exciting.

Thank you to my family. Thank you, Mom, for your admirable strength and providing your undying support every minute of every day. Thank you, Dad, for making me laugh when I need it the most. Thank you, Nonnie and Kelley, for showing me that love is love and it has no rules. Thank you Lexy, Logan, and Gabryle for forgiving me even when I don’t deserve it. Thank you to the new families I have found in places all around the world.

Finally, and perhaps the most special thanks I must extend is to those who so candidly shared their stories with me. At points, I feel I did little in the construction of my creative piece because the beautiful, touching stories made it so easy. Each of you expressed strength, resiliency, and an uncanny understanding of the world and of yourselves, so thank you for the inspiration.
VITA

EDUCATION

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY May 2019
B.F.A. in Performing Arts
Mahurin Honors College Graduate
Honors Capstone: *Transcendence: An Elegy to Transgenerational Systematic Adaptation*


PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

WKU Study Abroad & Global Learning Student Representative 2018-2019
Barter Theatre College Playwright’s Festival – Playwright January 2019
UK College of Medicine Bowling Green Campus – Standardized Patient 2018-2019

AWARDS & HONORS

Summa Cum Laude May 2019
Potter College Outstanding BFA Performing Arts Student May 2019
Kentucky Governor’s School for the Arts Scholarship 2015-2019

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

WKU Exchange: University of East Anglia Study Abroad 2017-2018

PRESENTATIONS

*Transcendence.* WKU Department of Theatre & Dance Studio Series B. Gordon Wilson Hall Lab Theatre. Bowling Green, KY. April 2019

*Space Songs on a Spider Web Sitar: Histories and Legacies of the Musical Hair.* Co-presented with Dr. Michelle Dvoskin as part of WKU Project 1968: The Teach-In Series. Bowling Green, KY. November 2018
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“For the sun is always right on time
and even that may be reason for a kind of joy”

- John Stone, Gaudeamus Igitur
“Human beings tell stories. That’s how we have made sense of our world, connected, and related with each other since we were hunter-gatherer tribes sitting together around a campfire.”¹ Storytelling is an ancient artform that is rooted in oral communication—the earliest form of storytelling humans have. Stories, told both verbally and nonverbally, extend beyond barriers of time and space. They inform humanity’s ideas of truth and identity—catalyzing change and challenging the norm. At its core, however, storytelling cultivates a sense of belonging between individuals.

Theatre is a vital and powerful tool when engaging in storytelling. The art form has the potential to develop and shape ideas that are innately human. Theatre breaks cultural barriers—using interdisciplinary elements to express any given story. The effectiveness of theatre is not dependent on prior experience or literacy skills, but rather it depends on the ability to communicate through emotion and visuals.² This is what creates a compelling piece of drama. Theatre has the power to confront tension, conflict, and relevant societal conversation that may be otherwise ignored. When focused on community building, theatre will often question contemporary issues and cultivate discussion amongst the participants of the piece—the cast, crew, and audience. These discussions are geared towards advocating for change or providing fresh perspectives on controversial topics. While this isn’t always the case, it is at least a frequent residual side effect.

One of the most compelling elements of theatre is its ability to give voices to the marginalized. While other art forms accomplish this as well, theatre is unique in that it puts these voices in front of our faces and directly addresses the fact in front of an audience. Theatre can also serve as catharsis for an audience—some theatre practitioners made performance with this being the exclusive goal. Catharsis, by definition, means “purification or purgation of the emotions (such as pity and fear) primarily through art.”\(^3\)

Watching stories come to life on stage, stories that cover an extreme spectrum of love, hate, pain, joy, and everything in between is an inherently cathartic action. Any element to which an audience can relate is catharsis.

Drawing on Aristotelian roots, catharsis comes from audience recognition of what a character or actor on stage is experiencing. Historically, tragic Greek plays included the element of *anagnorisis*, or recognition. This recognition usually occurs when the protagonist discovers their actions or attempted actions are not what they initially seemed (i.e. the murder of a relative).\(^4\) The effect of the protagonist’s discovery, or the major plot-twist, serves as catharsis for the audience, given they are able to relate. When considering a wide range of emotions, one must reflect on oneself to feel a sense of catharsis. For example, an audience member relating to the death of a character because it resonates within their own life is an example of catharsis because they took the first steps of reflecting and recognizing that this is something they know. The same is said for moments of passion, love, joy, intimacy, hatred, and fear. While the foundational Aristotelian idea of catharsis


is limited to historical tragedy, what it communicates and represents is transferable to contemporary drama. Catharsis is further identified as “the purgation of audience members’ emotions, the purification of an action—which would otherwise be considered censurable—through plotted elements, or even the removal from the mimesis of that which would, in reality, produce confusion.” Considering that, catharsis can inherently be experienced in dramatic moments of extreme emotion, as long as there is an audience member who can relate to the circumstances.

When it comes to community building in theatre, we are often asked to reflect on our own communities. This project intends to instigate reflection about the groups we identify with and the people with whom we associate. It asks the audience to think deeply about their place in society and their own sense of individualism, while also serving as a piece of entertainment aimed towards telling the stories of those who have been affected by tragedy. Working on this project, I witnessed the creation of a new community from the roots of a pre-existing one. From there, I began to observe that this kind of act occurs everyday and that a community is only built by its strong sense of individualism.

Transcendence began as a passion project, of sorts. I had begun working on the idea my senior year of high school, though at the time there was no intention for it to flourish into what it has become. Sparking from the idea that we often talk about the events of September 11, 2001 but never the people, the play began to shape itself. I watched countless interviews and documentaries that year, trying to grasp the responses from individuals who

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had been affected by 9/11. From that, I wrote a short play titled *If the Moon had Stayed Awake*, inspired by the thought that if the sun doesn’t rise then we don’t have to face the day, and vice versa.

I personally don’t remember 9/11. I also made the decision to not ask my parents about their experiences or how they told me. While that may serve as a limitation, I made that decision to avoid allowing my own personal biases to shine through the piece. I felt equally a part of the community that was cultivated in this process, however, I saw myself as a mere facilitator for the bigger picture. I wanted to be the one to tell others’ stories rather than put myself on an indulgent pedestal with a personal story I hardly even had.

I began collecting stories informally from the very start of the process. People would casually tell me their “9/11 story” or a story they knew related to it. I applied for and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to begin conducting formal interviews that would then be used in the performance piece. The process required an informed consent document\(^6\) in which participants signed to confirm their agreement to participate. The consent form details aspects such as potential discomforts and risks and allows the participants to withdraw from the study at any point.

I found myself humbled in the interview process. The stories I collected were beyond what I had imagined. People were sharing their intimate, vulnerable stories with me which had a profound effect on the final product of the project. I conducted interviews with peers and others that spanned two or three generations above me. Limiting myself to

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\(^6\) See Appendix.
a pre-established community—the WKU Department of Theatre & Dance—allowed me to dig deep into the emotional breadth of these experiences. It also further allowed me to study and analyze the similarities and differences of one particular community. Focusing on this provided a community for me, one that I am also part of, that is closely tied to New York City. Many of the faculty I interviewed knew people in or near New York at the time of 9/11, which cultivated a powerful narrative that proves just how close we can be to something, regardless of distance or other circumstances.

The ensemble contributes with their own personal stories, along with the dramatic retelling of other’s stories. I kept the rehearsal process structured with an idea of an ultimate goal, but I allowed the ensemble to have some free reign and gave them the ability to truly collaborate on this process. I encouraged suggestions in the script, in the staging, and the structure of the piece. I aimed for this to be a process focused and founded on the diligence and trust of the ensemble. There is something remarkable about watching your peers engage their creativity and imaginations to construct something so delicately poignant—something that one person simply cannot do. I wanted to provide a platform and opportunity for people to share their own voices—a phenomenon that is rarely seen on stage.
Devising Theatre

Devising is a process that requires intense collaboration and trust within an ensemble. Generally, the process consists of creating a performance piece from scratch, considering input, ideas, and individualized stories from the ensemble. Devising is most useful as a tool or catalyst for conceptual projects that explore a wide variety of themes and elements. Alison Oddey, in her handbook *Devising Theatre*, explains, “Devised theatre can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement.” This process starts with a foundational idea, message, concept, or other inspiration which the ensemble explores and then proceeds to create a performance piece.

This project, this performance piece, is considered devised theatre. While it deviated from some traditional elements (i.e. different experimentation with structure than is typically seen in devising), the heart was still there. My end-goal was to have a working script based on the interviews I collected, conversations held in rehearsals, and the ensemble’s personal narratives that served as a solidified structure for the performance. This script continuously changed, and I will talk about that process later, but I balanced the devising process with theatrical convention—an element or group of elements that has become expected in traditional dramatic context. In this specific context, theatrical convention represented the set of rules we established as theatre-makers. Those rules

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included the establishment and disestablishment of the fourth wall, the suspension of disbelief that these were people of younger generations telling the stories of people from older generations (which was also solved through the use of a prop), and the idea that the performance consists of actors also playing themselves onstage.

In the process of *Transcendence*, I started by conducting initial research on collective trauma, tragedy, community, and responding to this research through theatre. Collective trauma is defined as “the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people.”9 I kept this definition in mind as I approached the first steps of the devising process. My intention was to explore and analyze the way tragedy affects not only the people who are directly involved, but also those that feel the residual effects from an emotional or physical distance.

Collective trauma focuses on the intergenerational and how it may affect people who are further removed by time and space. Storytelling and collective trauma correlate in this context by following the social establishment and construction of meaning. Gilad Hirschberger outlines six attributes in which meaning is established through collective trauma. I will highlight four of them below: (1) “passing down culturally-derived teachings and traditions about threat that promote group preservation”.10 The production considers this point by establishing that most of the stories being told on stage are those that are being passed down from older generations. The older generations are collecting these stories that

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help to advise the future generations. This idea both warns today’s youth about the reality of tragedy and the effects it has on large groups of people, as well as protects the stories that are being told about these tragedies because the erasure of history and terror is destructive to the progression of society. The ensemble uses the performance as a playground of sorts to understand how we can use these stories to communicate and inform ourselves and those who come after us.

(2) “These traditions of threat amplify existential concerns and increase the motivation to embed the trauma into a symbolic system of meaning.”\textsuperscript{11} While in rehearsal, we explored how we could use the history of tragedy as a symbol to establish meaning. Geared towards 9/11, we considered the ways in which tragedy could be used as a driving force to come together in community. This ended up being an engaging conversation piece, as well as an action, as I witnessed the creation of a community within this ensemble of people. Because we defined tragedy as a symbol, or a vessel for a bigger picture, we were able to discover meaning within systematic contexts—that being society and society’s response to tragedy. As our own community, we also used tragedy as a symbol for hope. Together we found that hope was the deeply rooted theme within all these stories, whether it was explicitly stated or not, hope was evident even within the sacrifices. Through talking about tragedy, in a broad sense and on a personal level, the ensemble was able to gain an understanding of how community is built by establishing one themselves.

\textsuperscript{11} Hirschberger, 2.
(3) “Trauma fosters the sense of a collective self that is transgenerational thereby promoting a sense of meaning and mitigating existential threat.”\footnote{Hirschberger, 2.} The idea of a collective self resonates within the piece because the ensemble functions as a unit—a unit that is made up of diverse individuals, but a unit nonetheless. In the context of *Transcendence*, the unit catalyzes a transgenerational exchange. This is an exchange of stories and narratives that helps them better understand the world in which the other lives. The trading of stories, and the performance of the narrative, cultivates a sense of meaning of oneself and their place in the world—intergenerationally, socially, and politically. The trade also instigates a feeling of comfort. The ensemble addresses this through their storytelling. By sharing the narratives of people who are of different generations, they build a heightened and deeper sense of comfort and trust. This storytelling forges the divide between generations and uses collective trauma as a tool for the construction of community.

(4) “Over time collective trauma becomes the epicenter of group identity, and the lens through which group members understand their social environment.”\footnote{Hirschberger, 2.} Perhaps one of the most essential aspects of the production is identifying the ensemble as something cohesive and aesthetically consistent. This is not only important for compelling theatrical reasons, but for symbolic reasons too. At the core of this group, the core of these stories, is an understanding of collective trauma. Collective trauma, at least, is what brings these people together. In the case of 9/11, the identification of collective trauma defines the impact that the events had on society. This “post-9/11 world” is the societal recognition of
collective trauma. Contemporary life is now split between two generational timelines—the pre and post-9/11 world. After the events of 9/11, America’s group identity changed and adapted, becoming painfully aware of the severity of the terrorism plaguing the world. The ensemble was challenged to try to understand this shift while they told stories of those who are of generations before them. Together they constructed a unified idea of their social environment to maintain their collective group identity.

The conversations we had in the rehearsal room spoke to the creative process of the production on several layers. First, the conversations helped to inform the script. The script is a hybrid of documented interviews, story-inspired text, and recollection of conversations held in rehearsal. From the beginning of the rehearsal process in Fall 2018, we would sit down and engage in poignant discussions. While some members of the ensemble changed between semesters, the conversations built a foundation for the production. Some of the questions we discussed included how has 9/11 shaped the contemporary world; how do you define tragedy; what does community mean to you; and what is America—the latter of which served as a major playing point in the performance.

The conversations were a catalyst for community building. This is how the ensemble established trust, challenged themselves with intellectual and controversial discussion, and got to know each other on a more intimate level. This part of the process was vital in establishing our own community—I believe that there can be no community without trust, so this had to be the first step and it had to happen before we had a script. There was an underlying idea that we were coming together to both recognize and celebrate our differences, as well as discover how we are alike.
A notable talking point was the idea of identity. Each member of the ensemble, through these various conversations, explore their own identity and their individual meanings of sense of self. Under the context of 9/11, we considered the idea of identity threat\textsuperscript{14}, or the tensions created from viewing a group in a positive way while acknowledging any moral indiscretion within that group. This is a popular topic surrounding the events of 9/11 as it pertains to the discrimination many people of color and other marginalized communities faced in the wake of the events. From this sparked remarkable discussion on how identity plays a role in collective trauma. Collective trauma has the power to shift someone’s sense of identity.

\textit{The New York Times} published an article in 2016 describing what happens to a group of people when their environment is uprooted and completely redefined. They detail the Buffalo Creek flood of 1972 when a dam burst and invaded the town with wastewater and sludge. In its course, it destroyed homes, schools, churches, and killed one hundred and twenty-five people.\textsuperscript{15} The article explains that the survivors of the flood were “psychologically traumatized”\textsuperscript{16} and were experiencing inherent collective trauma. The flood affected the social environment of Buffalo Creek—destroying routine, relationships, and generations worth of social richness. The residents “struggled to find meaning and purpose.”\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{16} Gross, “Are Americans Experiencing Collective Trauma?”

\textsuperscript{17} Gross, “Are Americans Experiencing Collective Trauma?”
The tragedy in Buffalo Creek is distinctive, as every tragedy is different and has different effects on an individualized level, but the universal effects of tragedy hold steady. Like with the events of Buffalo Creek, the events of 9/11 caused global distress, as well as collective identity crisis. Both the people directly affected by 9/11 and those indirectly affected, spanning intergenerationally, felt the shocks and shifts in identity. This identity crisis was witnessed in individuals, communities, and on a wide-scale level. The world saw an immediate change in society. The people of the world were challenged to learn to adapt to a post-9/11 world that looked and felt completely different. The effects of this shift, along with the adaptations that occurred alongside, are still being felt today.

The topic of systematic adaptation, or the adaptation of an entire group of people following a major traumatic event, was what fueled this project. I challenged myself to ask the question, *how do we adapt to events like this?* In the process of *Transcendence*, I explored this question with the ensemble to understand the ways in which humans are forced to adapt to a “new world”. The fundamental shift into a “new world” is not exclusive to 9/11. The reason for using 9/11 to explain this is the chronemic relevance and because the current collegiate generation has lived in two different worlds (perhaps three now, considering the post-Trump election era)—those two worlds being pre and post-9/11.

The way tragedy cultivates the idea of the “new world” is subjective and dependent on the individual. In this context, at least in the rehearsal process, we uncovered that the “new world” is a symbol for adaptation. In the wake of tragedy, humans are forced to adapt to whatever circumstances have been presented. The reality becomes what a group of people have experienced, and the reality remains that the past cannot be changed.
Adaptation requires reflection on and recognition of history. Whether this shift is conscious is dependent on the group of people affected. Humans’ ability to adapt is also dependent on their cognizance to the circumstances.

**Documentary/Verbatim Theatre**

One of the quintessential questions at the start of this process was *what kind of story do I want to tell?* After conducting initial research and collecting and transcribing interviews, I shuffled through to find similarities and differences between stories. By drawing lines between these stories, I discovered what kind of story I wanted to tell. I decided I wanted these interviews to represent a larger, systematic phenomenon. These stories of 9/11 would symbolize the ways in which people respond and come together in times of tragedy. The similarities between the stories serve as a bridge on their own, but beyond that, they allow the ensemble and me to explore the nuances of people’s responses to tragedy.\(^{18}\)

*Verbatim Theatre, or Documentary Theatre,* can be described as a “form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary people’, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, 

\(^{18}\) See Appendix for example.
or combination of these things.” 19 Transcendence, through the interviews I collected, uses verbatim theatre as a tool to achieve the goal of the piece—telling the story I felt needed to be told. I collected the interviews, transcribed them, and constructed them into an unorderly first draft. The process of cutting down the text was painstakingly brutal. I had to decide what was most essential to the performance and what could be transformed or cut out completely. I also had to maintain a time limit of under sixty minutes to keep within the guidelines of the WKU Theatre & Dance Department. With nearly three hours of interviews, the process was long.

I eventually decided to take my own route towards achieving my goal. I allowed myself to be less strict with the traditional form of verbatim theatre and use some artistic liberty. I maintained the foundation of verbatim theatre techniques, taking few liberties on changing any of the actual words of the transcribed interviews. However, I did make the decision to include writing of my own inspired by pieces of stories, as well as use material the ensemble had written in rehearsal. Following this, I collaged the text together (all material from interviews, myself, and ensemble that I wanted to include) and created a cohesive piece that consisted a group of people on stage sharing stories about collective tragic experiences and reflections on personal tragedy at any given scale.

Once we began working with the text (which continued to change often in the rehearsal process—as is with any new works piece you may encounter), there were a few things we kept in mind. The first being the idea that this process, this style of theatre seeks

to “remove the difference between performers, directors, and sometimes designers [and] some of the warmth of the stuff that’s been given to you passes into the rehearsal room.”

Using verbatim theatre served as a catalyst for blurring the lines between actors and the creative team. This style of theatre cultivates a more genuine sense of collaboration—one that may still get messy at points—and maintains the notion that everyone involved can freely contribute. Another idea that we used in the process was exploring the solidarity that verbatim theatre can create between members of the ensemble. By retelling real stories, the ensemble builds a sense of blind trust with the people who originally told the stories. This then gives them room to reflect and build on their own experiences to relate the text back to their personal lives. While many of the members of this ensemble do not remember the events of 9/11, they were able to discover moments within the text that spoke to them in a broader sense.

In rehearsal, I did my best to hold the ensemble members accountable for providing these stories justice. The stories are from real people with real experiences and regardless of what it says, it should be treated with respect, responsibility, and empathy. Together, we focused on the importance of caring for each piece of text with delicacy. This allowed the ensemble to explore and discover each person’s individual worldview—a concept that analyzes how individuals view the world. There is even a line that directly alludes to this idea: “I am not living in your America. He is not living in her America. We are not living in each other’s America, because when it comes down to it, what does that word even

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20 Derek Paget, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques,” 318.
mean?" While this line is not verbatim from any interview or other source material, it gives the same idea that this process is exploring how we each view the fragility and vulnerabilities of ourselves and the world around us. Again, it was instilled from the beginning of working with the text that the ensemble holds the responsibility to treat these pieces with care and compassion—an establishment of an idea that ultimately cultivated a community.

There is a notion surrounding documentary theatre that there is a sense of historical discontinuity in the creation of most documentary theatre pieces. Derek Paget, a scholar and professor at the University of Reading, explains this discontinuity as a strength and a weakness, “The strength comes from documentary theatre’s repeated ability to reappear as new and excitingly different; weakness follows from the way practitioners—especially young ones—are cut off from their own history.”

Transcendence challenges this notion by illustrating both intergenerational voices through stories and the personal narratives of the ensemble members. My goal was to include everyone in this history and create a transgenerational account of powerful narratives. I did this by giving the ensemble structured creative freedom to express how they want the overarching story to look. They use their own ideas of self to inform the pieces that were spoken by people of older generations. While conducting interviews, I also made sure to collect a diverse amount of intergenerational voices to ensure that a wide variety of voices could be heard. The voiceovers in the beginning of Transcendence—spoken by people of older generations—

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21 Nick Struck, Transcendence, 9.
also help maintain this continuity as we establish from the very start of the performance that this isn’t simply a group of millennials experiencing something in which they are unable to relate.

We also maintained the idea that the actors in the ensemble serve to ‘speak for’ the absent. In this case, the ensemble members are speaking for, in most cases, people of older generations than them. There are some cases in which they speak for their peers, but the idea holds steady. It was important to me in the process to explain that the ensemble members are vessels for stories that are not their own. Jada Jefferson, senior ensemble member, speaks to this with the opening line following the voiceovers. She elaborates that the audience is there to engage with this community, as well as recognize that the people on stage serve as communicators for a bigger picture of stories that do not belong to them.

*Limitations*

The ensemble, while being some of the most curious and creative people I have had the pleasure to work with, is intended to consist of an intergenerational cast. The stories told in the production are most effective if played close to age of the original speaker of the text. This production included exclusively Western Kentucky University students, cultivating a compelling perspective on how our current millennial generation responds to tragedy, however, the text is best served with a diverse intergenerational cast. Beyond that,  

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due to logical IRB restrictions, I could only interview individuals over the age of eighteen. This project might be better served if I came back to it in several years, or perhaps by finding a way to collect the stories of those who weren’t alive during 9/11, but have grown up in a post-9/11 world just the same.

The interviews I conducted were mostly from people within Western Kentucky University’s Department of Theatre & Dance. This was intentional and effective to the point that the participants are part of an established community, so I was able to study a pre-existing group to help inform the process of my research. The limitation from these interviews is that the study of the established group of people inhibits the collection of stories from individuals outside this community.

My research also does not include reference to other theatrical contexts surrounding 9/11. While I did study the dramaturgy of productions such as *Come From Away*, I did not include this in the construction of my Honors Capstone Thesis. Other suggested drama reading surrounding 9/11 include Anne Nelson’s *The Guys* (2001) and Annie Thoms’s *With Their Eyes* (2002). These works are also vital to the understanding of psychological responses to tragedy.

Another limitation is the majority of participants were white and cis-gendered, restricting the diversity of the stories that are being told. My ultimate goal with this project is to explore more diverse voices as they respond to tragedy.
When considering national tragedies, there is a natural human instinct to be altruistic. Social psychologists describe this as the “in-group/out-group” mechanism. In these cases, we desire to enhance the bonds within our in-groups and ostracize the out-groups. The people who we find to be most like us are the in-groups and the people who aren’t are the out-groups. While we discussed this concept in the rehearsal process, the idea also serves as a limitation because the ensemble is itself a sort of in-group. These are like-minded people coming together to comment on the inequities of the world and try to find meaning in the face of tragedy. This creates a tricky paradigm as the building of community is essential post-tragedy, but we must simultaneously recognize that it is dangerous to be exclusive to our communities. If we remain exclusively in the groups we feel most comfortable, we immediately become restricted to perspectives that align with ours. This is a natural human tendency, but society can only enhance with healthy disagreement.

There is no disagreement or internal conflict in Transcendence, which may not always be theatrically compelling, but it is important to see what a community of this caliber looks like. I like to say I was just lucky enough to have cast people who understand each other’s perspectives well enough for there to be no conflict. On stage we see an established in-group, which is important to note and acknowledge as we do not speak for everyone in this performance. I also made the decision to add a moment near the beginning of the performance to address the fact that the ensemble are telling stories that are not theirs and they are merely vessels for a bigger picture.

Considering all of the above, the project is also a work-in-progress. The development of a new play is one that can be excruciating at times. The script that has been put on stage is one that will continue to require diligent attention. The process of this has not been perfect or pretty, but it is one that has allowed me to engage in and embrace new challenges. Further alterations are expected as I continue to discover more about the subject at hand—this project is a mere beginning to something that is much bigger than me.

**Reflection**

The performances of *Transcendence* occurred on April 15 and 16, 2019 in the Gordon Wilson Hall Lab Theatre. The production was well-received by audience members—mostly consisting of students, faculty, and family members of those involved. I spent time during both performances to look around the theatre and study everyone’s reactions. This is often the case when I’m watching a performance of my own work. This isn’t necessarily for validation—though that may be a subconscious reason—but rather to study how people are engaging with the material which will inform me what parts resonate with audiences the most. In this case, I wanted to see if people were invested in the stories the actors were telling, and from what I gathered, for the most part, they were.

It was a quiet and reserved investment, one that was filled with speculation and possibly some discomfort because people weren’t sure how to react. This wasn’t my goal;
however, it wasn’t something that was jarring to me. I knew some audience members would react differently than others, given that some of the stories, especially the ones personal to the ensemble, could appear rather controversial. While these are merely stories that we’ve collected and are telling, some of them hold strong opinions that are democratic and liberal in nature.

I was greatly satisfied and proud of how the performances ran. They ensemble communicated the script and the bigger picture fluidly. I received a lot of comments asking if the piece was scripted—which they did ad-lib a good amount of material, but that goes to show the amount of work they put into being able to tell these stories in their most raw form.

We invited the audience into our community and they adapted as the ensemble told these stories on stage. They followed the ensemble on their journey of bearing their vulnerabilities and contributing to a larger conversation. The stories told in Transcendence and the order in which they were told were designed to spark discussion, allow people to listen, and for audience members to connect and relate. I feel that we achieved this as everyone has their own story to tell, and we were able to provide a catalyst, or a starting point, for those stories to be told too.

Perhaps one of the most rewarding parts of this process was witnessing the ensemble come together and cultivate their own sense of community. By allowing themselves to be vulnerable with one another, they were able to learn from each other via shared experiences. While our conversations didn’t always directly relate to tragedy, they did always enhance our sense of community. From each of them, I was able to learn about
myself, the art I want to create, and the humility I desire to express in my life. The ensemble considered every aspect of every story and discovered the nuances that are associated with the psychological effects of tragedy. In one of our last rehearsals, the ensemble performed my challenge (one that was initially intended to reignite discovery within the text) of rewording their own text and telling the same stories in a different way while also reflecting on themselves. This exercise, one I will never forget, proved to me the strength and resiliency of all eleven of these people. Together we built an extraordinary community and learned to rely on storytelling, embrace the fear of adaptability, and understand one another with a heightened sense of compassion and empathy. This community truly was, and forever will be, transcendent.
TRANSCENDENCE

A documentary-style theatre piece

by Nick Struck
Voicemail

My birthday is on the 9th of September and I turned thirty that year. My wife was out of town, scouting our apartments because we were getting ready to move, so I went home to visit my folks. I woke up in my bed that I spent my high school years in on my thirtieth birthday smelling pancakes. I woke up to pancakes, had breakfast with Mom and Dad, and then drove back home. That morning though, the morning of 9/11, I'm driving to work listening to my normal radio station, the rock station. It's not political at all. And then the guy comes on and says, “hey a plane just hit one of the towers. It's not a small plane.”

So, I get to work, and I turn the TV on and I'm standing there watching as people shuffle in, and together we watch the other tower fall. Thinking like what the hell just happened. It's one of those moments where you're thinking, what is this? Is this real?

Voiceover

My husband and I had just moved to the D.C. area a few weeks before it happened. We moved down from Massachusetts literally two weeks before it all hit. I was teaching at a K-8 arts magnet school. It's right in the flight path of St. Andrew’s airforce base, so they started scrambling jets. I had just started teaching that day and didn't know anything had happened until about a half-hour afterwards because I was in class. One of the other teachers just came in in tears saying, “you've gotta turn on the TV, the towers just collapsed.”

All through that day, parents were coming and picking up their kids one by one, so your class was emptied of children throughout the rest of that day. Some of the students I taught that day had parents in the Pentagon, parents who were injured in the Pentagon. There was a feeling that at any moment, the next shoe would drop or the next thing would happen.

Voiceover

My daughter was accepted to NYU that next September. A year after all of this had happened. So I had to drop my eldest daughter off in New York right after... which is hard enough for me anyway just cause I'm a big, sentimental mess of a human being and love my daughters very much. But you could still smell the smoke in the air. There was still a fresh aura of this thing that had happened. Of course, we went down and saw the hole, along with everyone else who was going to look at the hole. And the concern that I had as a parent... it wasn't bad enough that my tiny little beautiful daughter was going to be walking around New York by herself, but this—this New York that now is, that was terrifying. But on another hand, New York being New York, they pull together, and it brings people closer. Which is sort of a tragic reality of when this kind of thing happens, right?
Lights up.

MUSIC: “Local Honey”. Actors enter. They interact with each other through the song. They are having a good time—singing, dancing, talking to each other. There should be a sense that they have a pre-established community from the moment they enter and begin interacting with one another. The actors make their way to their respective chairs as the music fades.

JADA

[We are all vessels for these stories – we are telling other people’s stories]

DAVID

Well, the where you were, sort of the basic question right…?

LAUREN

It’s one of those things that’s become a cliché.

COLBY

But it’s really the first thing a lot of us remember is it was this beautiful, clear blue sky day and somehow that’s in everyone’s minds.

HAILEY

It was the pre-iPod era so I was walking to work listening to the NPR radio on my headphones.

LUCAS

My first hearing of it was them in real time just going, “something happened, we don’t know what, but we heard a weird noise.”
ELIZABETH

I turned on to the news and everybody was just sitting there watching and we saw the second plane hit, and everyone went from thinking, “oh my gosh an accident to oh my gosh terrorism.”

II. HAPPY BIRTHDAY

HAILEY

I gave birth that day! You think in all the chaos and everything that he could wait just like a day or two to come out, but he’s always been an impatient little fucker so I guess that wasn’t an option for him. No, he’s great—my son is wonderful. Seventeen years old now, turning eighteen soon and he’ll be off to college. I tell him that story every year. He’s probably tired of hearing it, but it was hell for me so he gets to hear it anyway. You know, I actually heard that happened to a lot of women—they went into labor on that day, from all the stress and whatnot. Even the women who weren’t pregnant! … But yes, it was scary. I know that we had cell phones, but it wasn’t like it is today. And they shut off a lot of services too so no one could contact each other. I tried to call my husband but it wasn’t getting through. And I think we spent most of the day trying to call each other. You know, being in labor and afraid that your husband might be dead isn’t an ideal combination—he wasn’t by the way. Dead, I mean, he wasn’t dead. But he didn’t get to see the birth of his son. That made us sad for a while. All of this happening and he didn’t even get to see the birth of his own son…

ELIZABETH

My mom quit her job when I was born and on that day my dad was at work, and she had the TV on. It was black and white, but the volume wasn’t up. Then she saw it—the screen and thought oh how horrible that’s happening in some country somewhere. Like she didn’t know where it was happening, she had no idea. She saw it and thought it might have been from a long time ago and had no idea that it was happening in America. We went on, having a normal day, we took our daily walk, and when we got back she turned on the news and every channel was playing it. She thought, what just happened while I was outside with my children? Somebody did that on purpose. It was an act of terror and we had never heard of something like that before. All while we were on our daily walk.

JADA

Happy birthday to me.
ENSEMBLE

Happy birthday!

JADA

Thank you, thank you. But today is not my birthday. Not really. Today reminds me of my birthday, though. You know, I hate my birthday, I think it’s awful. It’s a celebration of passed time which is ultimately a societal concept brought on by people who needed structure in their lives. And the farmers. And the Mayans. The world has ended many times, and yet we keep coming back.

ENSEMBLE

But we keep getting better and better!

JADA

Agree to disagree, my friend. No—the world has ended many times for me. And it always seems to be on my damn birthday. That’s why it sucks. I hate my birthday. September 11 rolls around and people always want to celebrate and take me out for drinks and stuff like that but they also always want to remember. Which is fine, take the attention off me, but they always want to remember things that happened on my birthday. It’s sad. It’s sad to remember my birthday. Sometimes when people ask, I’ll tell them my birthday is in April or something. A month that people don’t think of, a month with no consequences. Or like July or something. Let’s remember independence and not something so sad. I just want to forget sometimes and I wish everyone else would forget, too. And yeah, I guess it’s bad to forget that I was supposed to be working that day but instead I took the day off because it was my stupid birthday. I got to take the day off while everyone else… well… I guess it’s sometimes bad to forget things like that—things that happen on my birthday.

I don’t think about things like this often just so you know. I hate thinking about my birthday, so it doesn’t come up much. Except here, I guess.  

LUCAS

It was a week and a half before I turned four years old and it’s like literally the earliest thing I can remember. Every morning my mom would be making breakfast and my dad
would be getting ready for work and we would watch the news together. And I never really understood any of it because, you know, I was three years old. But that day I remember getting interrupted and seeing the actual incident happening on TV. And for me as a little kid I was like, “oh is this like a movie that’s come on.” But my parents—I just remember them staring at the screen going like what in the world is happening right now. And as soon as it was over I was like, “What was that? What’s going on with the news and stuff?” And my parents tried to explain to me what was happening. They were like, “We don’t know all the details but some bad people took a plane and put it through a building and lots of people are probably going to die.”

ENSEMBLE

[THE IS AN UNSCRIPTED MOMENT – CONVERSATION BASED ON QUESTION]

III. TUESDAY MORNING

COLBY

I was in a staff meeting. And it was a Tuesday morning. The phone rang and on the line was our secretary. She said to turn on the news and I don’t remember exactly the words she used but something to the effect of, “A plane just crashed into a building in New York.” And we thought, oh God what a terrible accident.

LUCAS

I was in kindergarten I want to say and my mom picked us up early. We went home, and in the car the radio was on, and on the radio, they were saying something like, “the second tower had been hit.” So we got home and my mom turned the TV on and I saw the buildings and all the smoke coming up and I had no idea what it was. I didn’t think it was real. At that age, I obviously didn’t realize the significance of it. I thought it was just one of those world news things like in another country, you know, all the chaos.

DAVID

I don’t think I registered that it was in our country and how big of a difference it was about to make to everyone’s lives. It’s kinda crazy because I think… especially after seeing the
memorial, being there just knowing that we’ve risen from that desperation that we felt, and we’ve literally built a new World Trade Center. We’ve built a memorial. We’ve honored these people and we’ve said that as a country, we’re not letting them ruin us by their destruction and we’re rising above it and we’re choosing love over hate.

DEIDRA

I was in school, in the fourth grade. Nobody would tell us what was going on. It was chaos and we were scared but we all had no idea what was happening. All of my friends were leaving, being picked up by their parents. So I was there thinking, okay if everyone else gets to leave then hopefully I will too. I don’t want to be at school, school sucks. So, I waited for my parents to come, and I was waiting thinking something probably like oh they’re stuck in traffic, they get stuck in traffic all the time. But then the end of the school day rolled around and it was only me and a handful of kids left. There’s no doubt we were all wondering the same thing like when are our parents going to show up to get us? My dad was in the Pentagon and of course I had no idea what was happening in the Pentagon at that time…

ARIELLE

I can’t tell you how many drawings I had of kids drawing planes running into buildings. The number of cities they drew with planes going through towers and crumbling towers was really striking. I had kids creating improvised plays, and there was one group who created this whole once upon a time there was princess who lived in a tower and then an airplane hit the tower. And I’m like what?! But you can see them trying process this through drawing and through theatre like how do put this into something. You could tell they all knew, but they couldn’t really talk about it. Even when planes flew over the playground, you could see everyone react. You could see the kids reacting to these planes flying above them—little moments of please don’t let this be like what I’ve seen on TV. Because it all became so real then.

COLBY

I had finished college at that point, I was a year or two out of college, so I was educated enough to be suspicious of nationalist rhetoric, but my politics hadn’t developed enough as they would go on to be. It was this idea that no, this is bad. It’s that us/them mindset and that realization of what that feels like and how scary being any version of the other feels. I was living in New York, so excited to start my new job, really feeling like I was making it, you know. Like success was happening. I mean, I was going to the World Trade Center for training and that was kind of a big deal. So it’s Monday morning and I’m getting ready for training—I’ve got to look good, got to dress to impress and all that. I go in and training is great, it really is. I’m there for half the day at least. They let me go early actually, guess I
was doing a good job or something. I decided to take a walk around the buildings, thinking like *hey I haven’t been down here in a while, this is pretty cool*. Really just taking it all in, you know. Really just ready to tackle my future. I go home, get some great sleep, wake up early Tuesday morning and just enjoy my morning. I was in such a good mood, it was a beautiful, blue day. Before leaving to go to my second day of training, I turn the news on, catch up a bit, and then… it was so weird, you know. I mean, I was just there *yesterday*. I was just there walking around thinking about how cool it was. And to watch it just not exist anymore… I could have been in there. I could’ve been in there.

IV: AMERICA

ELIZABETH

I don’t fly on airplanes. You hear about the security and everything and I think it’s made us more conscious or whatever but also it feels like they’re almost waiting for something else to happen. People seem so suspicious now of people who look different than us. Like you’ve gotta make sure they’re not dangerous and I mean I’m standing right here and I could be dangerous, you know? But no one thinks about that, it’s really just all about people who are “different”. Which is so dumb because different is such a… weird word, I guess. What does it even mean? But yeah I don’t want to go on a plane and I’m afraid of heights now and places with large populations and I’ve heard all this stuff about that day and I’m just scared of a lot of things.

HAILEY

The story at that point was that a small plane had hit the World Trade Center. Which was bad news, of course, but I had heard of other instances where small planes had crashed or hit things and it happens from time to time. Eventually I made my way to a TV, where CNN was on, and all of a sudden, I’m seeing this huge building in smoke. People are crowding around, trying to figure out what’s going on. And as we’re watching, we see live the second tower collapse. No one said anything to each other, but we stood there and watched as something that once existed became nothing at all. The interesting thing is, ever since then I’ve never gone back to that news footage. There were so many unanswered questions, and the news didn’t have them, but I’ve never gone back to investigate. I’ve never gotten curious as to whether or not I could find the answers from that day on the news. And who knows if they’re there or not? Who knows…
SABAS

I was in Southern California at the time. Even MTV was playing news. And this was when MTV was all music, but even they were cycling through the events—trying to process what had happened. Which is just so… I don’t know, I wanted to tune into MTV to watch the newest NSYNC video or something, and that’s all I wanted. I wanted to take a break from this new reality and just go back to being angsty and watching music videos all day. It eventually got back to that after a week or so and I was able to secretly get down to some Destiny’s Child in my bedroom, but during that week, I really had to grow up and look at the world for what it is now.

*(JADA begins “Survivor” by Destiny’s Child.)*

JADA

Alright, let’s take a quick break and decompress for a minute.\(\text{xii}\)

*(The actors congregate and begin to chat to one another on stage. The journal goes off.)*

[MUSIC: “Doomed to Roam”]

V. TECTONIC PLATES\(\text{\textsuperscript{xi}}\)

SABAS

We are no longer—safe feels too easy a word. We have reached the end of an innocence. The veil has been lifted on America. My parents always talked about how they remember where they were when JFK was shot, they remember exactly what they were doing. But it’s those moments—it’s those moments where we see a fundamental shift in reality for this country because it’s happening right now. It’s all so… massive is too small a word… it’s so all-encompassing.

LILY

It’s more than that. I think a lot of people thought, well this is the cost of what happened—now our lives are changed. And I’m here thinking, we’re always fighting. You’ll hear
military people say this all the time, we’re always fighting the last war. So rather than thinking, okay well what’s the next thing that’s likely to happen, we throw all this angst as if somehow that is the only thing we need to worry about. But of course, it’s more complicated than that.

LAUREN

The way that we as a political entity—our government and our military—use weapons of mass destruction to justify the war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan. Which is the longest war we’ve ever been in, which blows my mind. And to what end? You know? I mean, they want the war. I remember when I was a kid, there was an Afghan restaurant near my house that I used to go to. The name of it is a city in Afghanistan I believe, but it had said Afghan restaurant on the front, and I remember walking by and they had covered that up. I think they were scared of people being retaliatory because the restaurant didn’t close, and they didn’t totally change but they covered up the word “Afghan”. We’ve witnessed a turning point for a sort of white-washed America.

LILY

America likes conflict. And power.

DEIDRA

I am not living in your America. He is not living in her America. We are not living in each other’s America, because when it comes down to it, what does that word even mean?\textsuperscript{xiv}

JADA

What is America? It’s a constant battle for something and that’s kind of what I think this place stands on. You don’t want to mess with them because what good will that do you when they have all the power? It makes me think a lot about freedom. When I think of that word, I think of balloons being released into the air. We don’t know where they go, but that’s what freedom is. It’s out there, floating around somewhere like it exists but we can’t see it.

[MUSIC: “Love Like There’s No Tomorrow” by The War and Treaty]

But if this is America, and we are freedom, then we’ve got a whole lot of discovering to do.
VI. REFLECTION

JADA
My name is Jada Jefferson and I’m a Diversity and Community Studies major advocating for people who look like me.

ELIZABETH
My name is Elizabeth Garapic and I’m working hard to destigmatize mental illness.

SABAS
My name is Sabas del Toro and I am telling the story of my people who are disregarded and forgotten in this country.

HAILEY
My name is Hailey Armstrong and I am providing comfort and support for survivors like me.

LUCAS
My name is Lucas Henley and I’m a journalist who is not writing fake news.

ARIELLE
My name is Arielle Conrad and I’m using my art to spread peace and love.

DAVID
My name is David Johnson and I am healing the world one song at a time.
LAUREN

My name is Lauren Hanson and I’m standing with my peers to make changes in my community.

LILY

My name is Lily Wang and I’m realizing that bad things happen all the time.

COLBY

My name is Colby Clark and I’m spreading positivity and optimism to the brokenhearted.

DEIDRA

My name is Deidra Alexander and I am believing that everything is a story that needs to be solved and there always needs to be hero. So that’s what I want to be.

VII. PART OF THE STORY

LAUREN

We are all pretty fucked up. In our own individual ways, of course. But in one way or another, we’re all neurotic or anxious or depressed or panicky about something. Every single one of us is always involved in some kind of existential crisis. Sometimes I think we’re all suffering. And that sounds very bleak, but because we’re all suffering, we all get it. We’re all being swept away by these wild, rocky, frightening rapids, and so we’re all reaching out for one another. We’re all straining and grasping through the waves but trying to catch each other. And when we do—when we do catch each other—we help each other to the shore.

SABAS

I’m a “chuco”, or someone who has seen both sides of the border wall. It’s 2019 and the political climate we face as Americans has led many to believe that the word ‘immigrant’ should not be used. Hell, I’ve run into people who were afraid to call me Mexican because they thought it was an insult. In other words, I’m a Mexican man in white skin, and if I looked Mexican these people wouldn’t have spoken to me in the first place. I’ve spent my
entire life trying to fit into this American way of life, but I know my roots. And I get to tell my story.

HAILEY

I used to go to Nashville with my church because they have a huge refugee population of people from Sudan and Burma and places like that. We used to go to the citizenship center and either take care of their kids or help them study for their citizenship exams. Every once in a while, though, we would go to the apartment complex that was home for most of them and throw parties, play with the kids, and put on performances for them, all kinds of stuff. I loved making them feel welcome and having fun with them and dancing with the kids. Life had not been too kind to these families, but to see them smile was incredibly rewarding.

LILY

(Singing “We are the World”)

I could sing this song all day. When I heard this song the first time, I felt at peace. It was like there were no problems or side effects or anything to mess with us. When I hear it, it reminds me those small moments where we do feel a little bit of peace. Those long morning showers with music blasting to wake you up, those late-night drives where you have no idea where you’re going, or those moments you get to spend with the people you love. It reminds me that even if we encountered anything, at least we could be together.

DAVID

What is it about childhood that feels so comfortable? I think it’s that childlike feeling of hope. Hope for humanity, for myself. I can’t help but return there. I return to the barn, to my mom smiling, to that song. When I lost my papaw, and then my mamaw, and then my gran, I went home in search of hope. I searched for it in places that usually made me smile, or feel at ease, but it felt empty. So, I ended up at church. I remember my pastor looked at me and said, “I know it feels like you are so far away from God. But I promise he is right next to you. And it is in the valleys that we feel closest to him.” I feel that many of us return to God when we are scared, lonely, broken. And He’s more than us, He’s more than tragedy, He’s more than love. When I return to Him it’s the feeling of home, mom’s smile, mamaw’s green beans, riding my horse through an open field, Gran’s laugh, an old book that feels more like a friend, sitting on the lake with Papaw, it’s that song. xvii

(Singing.)

And he walks with me, and he talks with me. And he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.
ARIELLE

A little bit of song lies in my heart. Well… maybe not so little. It’s a song that laughs loud and cries even louder. It’s a song that sounds happy, upbeat even at first, but the more you listen, the sadder you feel. You know, sometimes, I feel like I can conquer the fucking world with love and joy and a bad joke. Other times I feel like that Tic Tac that gets stuck in the lid and just can’t get it out, no matter how hard you try. We are here to tell stories from real people. People who have witnessed the world change and people who have been affected by that change. And it’s hard and it’s heavy but I want to give all of us a little credit for sharing. I like making people smile.

LUCAS

I don’t like TV, but I love when I get a message from my favorite person.

DAVID

I don’t like seeing people get hurt or be sad, but I love feeling alive.

HAILEY

I don’t like ignorance or prejudice, but I love my sisters and the feminists fighting for their future.

COLBY

I don’t like being late or dishonesty, but I love being surrounded by my friends and family.

ELIZABETH

I like long shirts and sleeping and I love people, but I don’t like when they leave.

DEIDRA

I like dancing and people’s company, but I don’t like liars and bigotry.
LILY
I like shopping and badminton and chatting with my friends.

LAUREN
I like driving at night and having conversations with strangers.

SABAS
I like paintings and the color blue and cultural values.

JADA
I like kissing slowly and sixty-degree weather and squeezing a hand for emotional support.

ARIELLE
My heart sings so loud in this world. And I’m no longer telling the story, I’m part of the story. 

[MUSIC: “Stand by Me” – Tracy Chapman]

(Actors say their farewells and exit. Lights fade to blackout.)

END OF PLAY
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Transcendence: An Elegy to Transgenerational Systematic Adaptation
Investigator: Nicholas Struck, WKU Department of Theatre & Dance, nickstruck@outlook.com

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this study is to analyze the transgenerational effects of collective trauma that result from tragedy, placing an emphasis on how people respond to tragedy and the psychological resonance that is left after tragedy occurs.

2. Explanation of Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your experience with tragedy, with a focus on the events of September 11, 2001. The interview may include being asked to tell a story about the event and how it affected you. This should take approximately 15-20 minutes.

3. Discomfort and Risks: There is the risk that you may find some of the questions to be sensitive. However, I do not anticipate any risks being associated with the questions, as you will lead the discussion and only speak about that in which you are comfortable.

4. Benefits: There are no benefits to you, but a final performance will take place that may feature parts of your stories. You will be invited to attend with no cost for admission.

5. Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. The taped recordings will also be secured with the researcher. In the event that your material is used, your name will be changed to ensure confidentiality.

WKU IRB# 19-174
Approved: 12/5/2018
End Date: 5/1/2019
EXPEDITED
Original: 12/5/2018
6. **Refusal/Withdrawal** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

________________________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant                     Date

________________________________________  _______________________
Witness                                      Date

- I agree to the audio/video recording of the research. *(Initial here) ________*

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3360
Survey Questionnaire

Project Title: Transcendence: An Elegy to Transgenerational Systematic Adaptation (Honors Capstone Thesis)

Investigator: Nicholas Struck, WKU Department of Theatre & Dance, nickstruck@outlook.com || (502)-689-0910

The interview question process is designed to allow the participants to lead the conversation. It keeps them in mind and provide them the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

1.) Introduce self/research project
2.) Explain to participant that they will be the driver of the conversation and should only share what they feel comfortable with (this should include addressing potential risks to them of triggers upon asking the given questions)
3.) Ask participant to identify age & gender (if comfortable)
4.) Propose the question: do you remember 9/11? If so, where were you and do you have any personal stories to tell? If not, how do you think it affects you today?
5.) Ask follow up questions as appropriate (allow to be a discussion at this point)
6.) Conclude the interview by thanking them for their time & inviting them to attend the final performance project
Appendix 3
Sample Interviews

*NOTE: These are transcriptions that did not make it into the final script

Nick: Do you remember 9/11? If so, where were you and do you have any personal stories to tell?

Participant: When was Facebook invented? Was Facebook a thing? I seem to remember social media… maybe it was emails. Maybe people were just sending emails around about it. But it was all people talking about how this changes everything. It felt like the tectonic plates of the country had been shifted somehow. But I have an older second cousin and he sent an email saying, “Nothing’s changed, welcome to the rest of the world.” We had never experienced that level of terrorist attack before. And so, while a lot of us, I think “us” meaning Americans, were thinking that somehow things would never be the same… there were other people who kind of felt like welcome to the world, Grow up, now take these things seriously.

Nick: How did you see people come together following the events of 9/11?

Participant: Weirdly enough, I mean obviously it was a horrible thing, but a lot of what really struck me was how everyone really came together and everyone kind of bonded. Everybody was looking for something to do. The only thing everyone could think was to donate blood, and they actually didn’t need anymore blood because there were too many blood donors. And also, sadly, I guess there weren’t really any victims that needed blood. I remember getting together with some friends and we walked down to the square and there were people doing vigils and things but it was more of that everyone had this urge to just want to be together.

Nick: What do you remember from 9/11?

Participant: I was really uncomfortable on the days following 9/11 with how jingoistic the responses got and how scary nationalist things got so quickly. And I was very nervous because I had a rainbow flag sticker on the back of my car—which I had never been nervous about before, I was living in a queer-friendly city—but I was really nervous that I was going to get beat up at a gas station because I had that on the back of my car and not an American flag sticker. I was actively afraid and vulnerable and scared. Not just of the outside world but of the nation I was supposed to be a part of.
Appendix 4

Cast/Crew List

The Ensemble
Deidra Alexander
Hailey Armstrong
Colby Clark
Arielle Conrad
Elizabeth Garapic
Lauren Hanson
Lucas Henley
Jada Jefferson
David Johnson
Sabas del Toro
Lily Wang

Production Team
Stage Manager: Jacey Fears
Assistant Stage Manager: Rachael Prewitt
Co-Director/Sound Designer: Hilarie Spangler
Lighting Designer: Coleton Wood
Costume Designer: Baylee Morton
Scenic Designer: Raylee Skipworth
Bibliography


Notes

i These voiceovers are intentionally placed to recognize the transgenerational aspects of the project. All three of voiceovers felt better suited to be read by someone from an older generation than the actors in the ensemble. It was also important to me to incorporate this kind of intergenerational representation that we lose by having an exclusively millennial/gen z cast. To incorporate this, we have Jada enter the stage with a journal that symbolizes that these stories are being passed down to this generation and we have the privilege to share them. The journal is used throughout the first half of the performance, passed between ensemble members as they speak to represent their sharing and interpretations of stories that don’t belong to them.

ii Music was vital to me in this production. I use the music to enhance and heighten relationships within the ensemble. I also use it as a storytelling tool to allow the actors to express themselves along with the music. The idea to use folk-based music was intentional—it serves to be uplifting and hopeful, which is what I was striving for with this piece. Too often we focus on the heaviness of stories like this, but it was my goal to break that stigma and find the humor within the hope and optimism. The music aids in enhancing this.

iii I allowed Jada to write this line and encouraged her to engage the audience to let them know they were just as much a part of this community as the ensemble on stage. What she came up with was an eloquently worded opening line that draws the audience in and challenges them to listen to and connect with these stories. She also established that most of the stories being told are not their own and they serve as mere vessels for the people who originated these stories.

iv This section of the play details stories that were told regarding someone remembering age – time is significant in this part. It also speaks transgenerationally to how people relate time and other significant events (i.e. birthdays) to tragedy.

v There was more than one interview in which this was documented. I have not looked at the statistics of this, but from what I gathered, many women went into labor on 9/11 due to the stress of all the events. One participant even recalled when their friend had gone into labor and had to find a way to the hospital while also not being able to get in contact with her husband because all the phone lines had been shut down.

vi This monologue was one that I wrote, derived from a story within a story of one of the participants. The participant described when their friend had the day off from work on 9/11 because it was their birthday.

vii This moment is an unscripted conversation that looks a lot like the discussion we had in the rehearsal process. We decided to put this on stage for a couple reasons: (1) something like this, an improvised discussion based on contemporary issues is rarely ever seen on stage unless in the form
of a talkback. I wanted the ensemble to be able to engage with each other in an intellectual capacity while also showing the audience the students of this generation can have conversations like this. It illustrates their ability to understand the world we live in and the deeply-rooted societal inequities that plague this world. (2) this opens the broader discussion of the piece and takes us out of 9/11 for a few moments. The conversation reminds us that this is a piece about how people respond to tragedy and participate in the current socio-political climate.

“Part III: Tuesday Morning” represents the retelling the morning of September 11, 2001. This section takes into consideration those who were in educational environments and how it affected them and their students discovering the information, stories from people who were in school at the time and what they remember from those moments, and how those moments remind us of hope amidst the chaos.

This line was also a common reference. Several interview participants shared the idea that the event was initially seen as an accident. They also shared the idea that the day of 9/11 was at first another ordinary day in America.

An example of how educators and artists desired to create immediately following the events.

“Part IV: America” explores the fears and reflections of people who were affected by this tragedy. This section still considers 9/11 but expands on the social trials and residual effects of coping with the aftermath. It begs the question; how do we hold on to ourselves when our identity has been exhausted?

A brief break for the actors was inserted here. They do not leave the stage, but they allow themselves to breathe and decompress for a moment. This is traditional in storytelling practices (i.e. a storytelling circle in the style of Roadside Theatre, see bibliography) in which the group relieves any built-up tension and socialize with one another. I felt this was vital in the production to maintain that sense that these people have come together to tell these heavy stories, but they are also humans who need a break from this kind of material. It also serves as a turning point in the style of the play.

“Part V: Tectonic Plates” is a shift in the play. The symbolic journal is no longer being used, as we see the stories branch away from being exclusively about 9/11 and enter the realm of more personal and intimate to the members of the ensemble. This is when the piece becomes much more dependent on individual reflection and considers the question that we explored many times in rehearsal, what is America?

I felt that this question, and the following question posed by Jada were essential to the construction of the piece. 9/11 serves as a severe turning point in the socio-political climate in America. More recently, in a post-Trump election era, we are asking ourselves again to consider the meaning of America and what it is to be American. It is also important to consider the racial, social, and political divides that plague the country now and how tragic events are often targeted towards a specific group of people (i.e. Pulse shooting, Charleston church shooting, New Zealand mosque shooting, etc.). This idea is vital to the questions asked in this Capstone project because tragedy affects the way humans see identity. When major tragedy like this happens, people must adapt to a new sense of identity—whether that be individual or collective, it still begs us to think about who we are and where we fit in the world. It also tends to develop a deeply seeded fear and paranoia. I find myself constantly asking, could I be the next victim? Tragedy’s effect on the body’s psychological state has consequential resonance in that we feel the need to be prepared for any
crisis at any moment in any place. Can people still go to the movies or church or school without a resounding fear that something like this could happen at any moment?

xiv “Part VI: Reflection” continues to catalyze and complete the shift into the personal narratives of the ensemble. The members of the ensemble strongly and proudly state their names and something that connects them to society. This moment in script was one that changed that most frequently. We could never find how to get the shift quite right, and this may not be the best solution, but when it did happen, it clicked for every member. There is a lot of strength in their claims and decree to their individualism.

xvi “Part VII: Part of the Story” examines several personal stories of the ensemble. Each one of these was written by an ensemble member. I wanted it to be as personal as possible while still relating to the overarching theme. In this case, most of the monologues discuss the actors’ place in the world. They spend time asking themselves who they are and where their place is, as well as how to provide hope for each other and their own communities.

xvii This monologue gives us the first mention of God. There are times I wish I had included more about God earlier in the piece because religion seems to be an important facet when faced with tragedy. People tend to flock to their place of worship, to their religious communities, when events such as 9/11 occur. Churches are often the first organizations you see helping those in need who have been affected by tragedy. While I didn’t explore religious correlations to tragedy much in my research, religious organizations are vital in looking at the structure of community.

xviii Arielle instigates an open-ended and optimistic ending for the ensemble. By professing what they like and dislike, they close the performance being able to relate their similarities and differences to each other. Because at the root of community is the individual, and in this community the individual is essential.

xix This line derives from one of the interviews I conducted. It resonated with me when it was said, and I decided to make it vital to the cohesion of the piece. The members of the ensemble are telling stories that do not belong to them, but they are inserting themselves and reflecting on the stories they are telling. They are saying that this may be a history they do not necessarily remember, but it is a history that they are undoubtedly a part of.

xx The cover of “Stand by Me” by Tracy Chapman serves to reestablish the trust in this community. As the ensemble says goodbye to each other and exit the stage, they continue to reflect on what they have built and what they will strive to keep on building.