

Tasha Faye Evans

She Stands Still

I am an actress and theatre maker from Vancouver, Canada. My training originates in physical theatre as well as in contemporary dance. I have worked in traditional forms of script-based theatre as well as actor-centric theatre, where the play is driven by the actions of the actors rather than the text. My most recent work includes the creation of my first one woman play entitled *She Stands Still*, a multi-disciplinary piece combining text, movement and projected imagery. After working collaboratively with various artists for the majority of my career, it is this experience of developing my own project that has given me the perspective on how I work and, essentially, what I need in order to keep me working. My creative process is definitely one that depends on the nature of the project, the creators involved, the style being explored, and the material being generated and developed. With every project however, there are stages that are integral to my process. Using examples from *She Stands Still*, I will explain these essential stages and the tools I use for generating an original script.

COLLECTING

In the beginning, I collect things. Before I enter the studio, before I begin to write, before I am able to commit to any specific idea, it is essential that I explore my curiosity about the project and gather evidence from my initial inspiration. This first stage of exploration includes collecting material that speaks to the source of my curiosity about content, characters, set, style and music. I spend hours in the library pulling books with titles and front covers that interest me off shelves. I read articles, taking notes and recording thoughts that race through my mind. I browse through art books and collections of photographs, photocopying images that catch my eye. I extract passages from my journal and write spontaneous poetry. I watch movies and take notes. When I am finished with this initial stage I have a large

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“Lady of the Trees”, an image used in *She Stands Still*.

Photo: Teri Snelgrove

collection of inspirational photographs, sayings, poems, stories and thoughts.

For *She Stands Still*, my curiosity led me into an Old Growth Forest for two weeks. Part of my investment in this project

centred on an urgency I felt about the destruction of Old Growth Forests, and in particular, the Walbran Valley. I wanted my play to capture the essence of this forest before it was completely destroyed by clear-

cut logging. I began by writing at dawn, mid-day, dusk and in the middle of the night. I had four different places where I went to write, including a giant stump in the middle of a clear cut. I did not end up using any of this writing but the image of this stump, and the immensity of the tree that had once been, became a central image that inspired many further investigations and became the foundation for creating my play and the title, *She Stands Still*.

Though I do not yet know how, this preliminary collection of found material will play significant roles throughout the development of the project. Some material will lead me like stepping stones into the next stages of my creative process, while others, especially the photographs, will become the gems that I will constantly refer to as inspiration when I am stuck or asking myself "why, am I doing this work?" In any case, indulging my curiosity this way, not only gathers a variety of invaluable material but also ignites momentum, initiating the creative process for play-making to begin.

PLAY-MAKING

One of the first steps to play-making for me is finding the place from which to begin creating, referred to in my training as "points of departure". I find these by organising the accumulated thoughts and materials that I have gathered during stage one. I separate all the information into categories according to which pieces of material are about specific possible characters, about the story, about the set, about images that I wish to create, and about text. Each category therefore consists of a collection of material, with key pieces of information to choose from, as points of departure. This could be a word, an image, a piece of music, a question, a piece of text, or anything from that category that inspires investigation.

Consequently, each category will become a path to investigate, with each piece of collected information used as a clue to prompt further explorations and uncover the story I am creating. It is important to note that not all investigations will be explored solely in the studio. It might be necessary to go to the library for further research, to watch a particular movie, or look for more specific images according to the category being explored.

For example, for *She Stands Still*, I began with a category called "My Great Grandmother". I had always known I was an aboriginal American, but did not know from which Nation. My grandfather grew up ridiculed for being a 'half-breed', so his being a First Nation person had been kept a secret.

As a point of departure, I went to the library to search for my great-grandmother's birth certificate. Finding this had a tremendous effect on the direction I took with my creative process. My great-grandmother had been born in the same territory as the Walbran Valley. All of a sudden, the urgency I felt about the destruction of this old growth rainforest became personal. The image of a clear-cut became a metaphor for the genocide of First Nation's culture felt in my own family. The title, *She Stands Still*, took on a whole different meaning.

There is a magic in the creative process where one path of curiosity will lead to another, only to uncover a crucial piece of the story waiting to be told. I like to refer to these paths as threads, that will, through discovery and development, be woven together to create the final piece. Some of these threads will be woven through to opening night while others may not. The most important thing is to investigate them all and see what happens.

INVESTIGATING

When I work in the studio, I always come in with a list of work to do. This list could

include investigating a question or a word, exploring a particular idea, developing a character, working with an important prop, or all of the above. I make a contract with myself that I cannot leave the studio until I have completed this list and created a new list for the next day. I need this plan to help me work through any resistance that occurs, especially when I find myself alone in a studio. What is important is to keep working no matter what. Sometimes this means I am writing on my computer, working on my feet, or wandering around the studio talking to myself about how stuck I feel.

There are three stages to my process in the studio: investigation, generation and development. During the first stage, my work is centred on exploration with the objective of discovering a deeper understanding of each particular thread that I am investigating. My focus is on asking questions and learning more about the story and who the characters are, rather than generating material. With each thread, I choose appropriate exercises to explore its contents physically, and open it up for discovery.

For example, in *She Stands Still*, an initial thread was a mythical character called the Lady of the Trees. I had collected information about trees that included images of bark, rings in stumps, and one particular image of an Elder tree in a forest. One of my questions about this thread was: "What is the wisdom inherent in such ancient old growth trees?" With this question in mind, I physically explored the image of a tree. Beginning from the image of bark, I travelled in a circle and imagined myself moving through the rings of a big old tree. When I found myself at the centre of the tree, I discovered an old lady in my body. It was this discovery that uncovered a crucial part of the story that I was about to tell. Somehow, the Lady of the Trees was connected to my great-grandmother. With

further investigation I would discover how these two threads were connected.

Consequently, it is this process of discovery and amplification that reveals the main threads to follow. Once I have discovered these, I can move on to the next stages developing and generating the material to create a script.

Of course, not all threads followed will lead to anywhere enlightening. In these early stages, I can feel very overwhelmed by so much uncertainty that I will doubt that I will ever create a final product. It is during these inevitable moments of panic that I need to be reminded of the integrity I have invested in creating this play and get back to work. These are the moments when I refer back to the gems of material that I collected at the beginning of the project for inspiration. For *She Stands Still*, one such gem was an image of a grandmother lying on the ground like a mountain with all her wisdom dripping into the earth in vibrant colours. This was very provocative as *She Stands Still* was based on the urgency I felt about losing my connection with my ancestral heritage. The image reminded me that despite my doubt, I had to keep working to create this play because it was absolutely imperative for me to tell my great-grandmother's story.

GENERATING AND DEVELOPING

There are various tools that I use, once I have established the main threads, to develop and begin generating material. Cue cards are very useful, especially during these early stages of development. During the investigative stage, generated material means, that as a result of the exercises used to explore each thread, I will have begun to gather a collection of work. This can include a piece of text, an image involving a character, a piece of a story, part of a scene, a movement sequence, or merely a thought



"Tree", an image of *She Stands Still*, Firehall Arts Centre, 2004. Photo: Jeremy Williams

that needs further development. As my focus shifts from investigating to developing ideas I will begin generating material organically. The cue cards are very useful because they help keep track of my work, becoming like pieces of the puzzle waiting to be fully realised and integrated into a script. As the developmental process continues, I can play them in ways that will help develop characters, flush out the story, sequence scenes into order, write text and uncover holes needing to be filled with more material.

CREATING A SCRIPT: WEAVING

Once I start playing with these cue cards as they relate to the order of material and specific scenes, I will end my day at the computer. This is not the time to be focusing on the writing but rather on transferring the cue cards into a first draft. This means that in the studio I will work on my feet to fit them together in an order that makes sense, according to a character's arc, the sequence of the story, or the progression of a concept. The cue cards help me to keep track of all the threads as they are woven together and become integrated into a script.

For example, part of *She Stands Still*'s story-telling is the use of projected imagery. As the story developed, this transformed from colourful images from nature to black and white ones of the city. The cue cards marked this transformation and also helped to keep the images in order as they related to specific scenes.

By the end of this generation and development process I will have created a draft. Having a working draft means that I am ready to leave the studio and focus solely on writing and developing the script. Before I head to my computer, I find it beneficial to show the work that I have created up to this point. Being a perfectionist and having high expectations of myself, I am not particularly fond of showing works in progress, but there are valuable things to learn from an audience that will serve the next stage of work. After being inside my project for an extended period of time, an audience helps me to experience my work from a subjective point of view. I can learn what is or is not working, what needs further development and whether the story is clear. I invite an audience whose opinions I respect and who will offer constructive criticism. Following the presentation, I invite everyone to partic-

ipate in a "talk back" session. I ask the audience key questions such as: what is the story about? What images stand out for you? What is unclear? How did you feel at the end of the piece? From this experience of showing the work, discussing content and collecting an audience's comments, I will gain a clearer understanding of what areas to focus on as I move out of play-making and into the next phase of script writing.

WRITING: A TAPESTRY

The process of play-making does not end once I leave the studio and begin developing the script. Often I will find myself needing to return to the studio to try out parts of the script on my feet, or to help move through a problem that I cannot solve by sitting at my computer. With the objective of serving the text and enhancing the script, I enter the studio with specific questions to ask and find answers for. During this process I will need to let go of some material while other parts will need further development. Letting go of material is not always easy, especially if it is something I really like. I need to remember when I am refining my work that essentially, I want my play to be clear and for the audience to understand my story.

I must have written and tried at least fifteen drafts of *She Stands Still* before all the threads were integrated in a way that felt clear and the story had truly been revealed.

IN CONCLUSION

Play-making for me is an intricate process that relies on faith, time and hard work. Even after the construction of a final script

there is always more magic waiting to happen once rehearsals begin. Being open to this magic is a key to play-making for me. As an artist engaged in my process, I create work almost as the work reveals itself to me. Sometimes it feels as if the story is waiting to be told. It is my deep investment in why I am creating this original work that inspires my how and initiates this magical journey of discovery.

TASHA FAYE EVANS (Canada) is a multi-disciplinary artist with an extensive background in physical theatre as well as dance. Tasha teaches writing and theatre classes for the Vancouver's Aboriginal community in the development of Full Circle's upcoming *Rez Show*. Tasha participated in the Magdalena International Theatre Festival in Cuba and in the International Theatre Festival for World Peace in Colombia where she performed a Spanish translation of her one woman show, *She Stands Still*. Tasha is engaged in First Nation Women's action against violence and works with youth living and surviving on the streets.