

# Performative Writing as Training in the Performing Arts

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While it can be enjoyable and meaningful for students to perform on stage, they often view a performance's end as just that—a definitive conclusion, a finished process. However, post-performance reflection, and revision, are critical components of art making. Offering writing strategies and examples of student work, this chapter advocates the body-centered, creative practice of performative writing as a useful method for training in the performing arts—an extended “stage” for students to revisit and reassess their work on the page as fully as on stage.

While performance students may find it exciting and meaningful to take on the role of a theatrical “other,” even when that other is one's self (as is the case of performance of personal narrative and autoethnography), they often find writing about their experiences post-performance of little value. But writing informs performance. While most students intuitively recognize Phelan's (1993) assertion that “performance's only life is in the present” (p. 146), and favor the *doing* of performance over the *writing* about performance, they must learn how to “re-mark again the performative possibilities of writing itself” (p. 148). This is not to discount how the act of performance creates knowledge, but rather, to position writing as an extended “stage” where the written word enhances the performance world. How, then, can performance training include both the preparatory work leading up to live performance as well as the reflection process that follows, allowing students to both experience and assess their work on the page as fully as on stage?

Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) edited collection, *Naming What We Know*, uses the notion of threshold concepts to investigate the many interdisciplinary approaches in which the field of writing studies, in the twenty-first century, is committed to “the subject of composed knowledge and the questions we ask related to this broad term” (p. 2). Their examination (including reference on how writing is performative; see Lunsford, 2015) calls for a fresh look at understanding how writing functions and what writing allows. Working from within the same logic—a multidisciplinary approach to writing, and writing as an entry point for understanding the craft of performance—my goals in this work are several. First, I discuss the emergence of performative writing, referencing the contributions and perspectives of those working to define the form. Second, I use the work of performative writing to offer several writing strategies students can use to both think and write

about their live performance work, each accompanied by an example of student writing. Finally, I advocate for performative writing as integral to actor training.

Phelan's (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* signaled a radical shift in thinking about live performance. "Performance," she argues, "cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (1993, p. 146). In other words, for Phelan, performance's power lies in its ephemerality, its loss, that which cannot be replicated. As a discipline, performance studies takes an embodied approach—"performance as a way of knowing" (Pelias, 1999, p. ix)—toward investigating the human condition. Aware of writing's inability to capture all that materializes on stage, performance studies artists and scholars heed Phelan's challenge to find an alternate way to write about live performance as more than mere reportage—to write performance anew.<sup>1</sup>

In *Performing Loss: Rebuilding Community through Theater and Writing*, Kanter (2007) investigates how loss can be performed through language, describing performative writing as:

Writing that behaves like lived experience. Here, performative should not be confused with dramatic or theatrical. Not all writing for the stage is performative, and some writing that was not intended for the stage is highly performative. Performative writing, like the best live performance, gives the reader a real experience in an imaginary space. Performative writing does not just describe an event or experience—it mirrors, behaves like, does its subject. Performative writing asks its reader or audience member to embody the ideas at the center of the text. (p. 12)

Kanter's insight enables this discussion in several ways. First, it builds a foundational connection between writing and performance. Second, it positions writing as another venue in which to stage experience, more than duplication, but an active reengagement where writing *becomes*—a performance in and of itself. Third, it demonstrates the relational nature of performative writing, between texts, performers, and audiences.

Pollock (1998) offers a "suggestive framework" (p. 80) for performative writing: "not a genre or fixed form . . . but a way of describing what some good writing *does*" (p. 75). Aware of its broad meaning, she notes how "performative writing spins, to some extent, on the axis of impossible and/or regressive reference and yet out into new modes of subjectivity and even referentiality" (1998, p. 76). This "spinning" is

1 While discussions of performative writing emerge primarily from those working in performance studies, and while what constitutes training in performance studies is usually different from training in the discipline of theatre, the ideas herein are certainly applicable toward disciplines across the performing arts.

what allows for the page to escape itself, becoming a world of its own—evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational, consequential—where “shaping, shifting, testing language” (Pollack, 1998, p. 75) allows for the shaping, shifting, and testing of that which eludes language, the experiential that exists because of, and yet beyond, writing.

In his bid to legitimize performative writing, emphasizing how it surpasses the limitations of traditional scholarly writing, Pelias (2005) offers three assertions that are of particular interest to traditional student training in the performing arts. First, performative writing allows for a closer examination of human experience, “where the raw and the genuine find their articulation through form, through poetic expression, through art” (Pelias, 2005, p. 418). Second, performative writing facilitates identification and empathy—“recognition and resonance” (Pelias, 2005, p. 420)—allowing more meaningful knowledge of self and other. Empathy is a foundation of performer training, and, like performance, writing becomes “a space where others might see themselves” as well as “an invitation to take another’s perspective” (Pelias, 2005, p. 419). Finally, performative writing takes a relational approach, “an interpersonal contract that [a writer] can elect to engage” (Pelias, 2005, p. 421). Performative writing, thus, sets the scene for questioning: “by confessing, by exposing, and by witnessing” (Pelias, 2005, p. 421). Phelan, Kanter, Pollock, and Pelias each equate writing with epistemic power “to actually produce thought and knowledge” (Lunsford, 2015, p. 44)—in other words, writing as a means of inquiry, knowing, transforming.

Reflecting the “descriptive/prescriptive, practical/theoretical” (Pollock, 1998, p. 79) essence of performative writing discussed above, while acknowledging its mercurial nature (Pelias, 2007, p. 182), what follows are some of the writing strategies I use with students, whether or not an explicit discussion of performative writing takes place in the classroom. Accompanied by student writing excerpts, the strategies incorporate the ideas of a variety of writers (scholars and artists alike) whose thinking informs mine. They are offered as equally effective, loose structures both open to interpretation and adaptable. Further, the strategies are not presented as mutually exclusive; in fact, they overlap considerably. And while they are intended for use in the college-level classroom, they can easily be modified for younger students as well. Finally, since I believe in writing as a process, especially coupled with the equally generative process of performance, reflection and revision are embedded throughout. As such, students are sometimes asked to develop performances in phases, workshopping ideas that lead toward a culminating project. For almost all students, writing about performance creates new ideas for future performance work, as is the case in the following examples.<sup>2</sup>

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2 For an additional example of students implementing, and thereby illustrating, the strategies herein, see Santoro, Berryhill, Nemeth, Townsend, & Webb, 2016.

## Write to Listen

Listening is a prerequisite for engaging in any kind of reflection, particularly for students in the arts. Listening functions as an important component of artmaking, as students learn to listen to and trust their own instincts alongside listening to and incorporating criticism from teachers and peers. In *The Muses Among Us: Eloquent Listening and Other Pleasures of the Writer's Craft*, Stafford (2003) refers to the writer as a professional eavesdropper: "By listening to the glories of conversation around me, I am moved to write, and I am reminded to listen closely to my own most quiet thoughts and dreams. In their inventive talk, my wise neighbors give me permission to take seriously my own internal voice" (p. 17). Writing becomes a site where performers can meaningfully engage their work, "a kind of bifocal attention" (Stafford, 2003, p. 32), where words evoke what we can (and cannot, or cannot easily) hear, what we know and what we do not yet know. The page—blank and waiting—listens.

Since many students are unaware of what it means to listen (or how to focus as a disciplinary ritual, for that matter), I offer the following pathways toward listening. Perhaps the most important advice I can provide is a paradigm shift. I share with students—early and often—how the act of doing, whether on the page or the stage, is, indeed, an action, active, alive. Thus, by redirecting students' awareness of their writing and performance pursuits, their insights (about process, themselves, others, etc.) shift.

I encourage students to listen alongside the other senses. While students will naturally gravitate toward sight (the most revered sense insofar as something that can be seen exists, and, therefore, can be "read"), they must be reminded of performance's sensorial labors in their totality: "The most secretive of the actor's bodies and, yet, arguably, the most ontologically primary . . . is the body of private sensation that constitutes itself for each of us just below the skin" (Graver, 1997, p. 231). How does the performance not only look, but taste, smell, feel, and sound? Observation through multiple senses asks students to consider facets of performance that often go unrecognized, or may be taken for granted. Whether describing a performance as howling and fiery, a gesture as slimy, or a facial expression as rancid, students begin to use the senses to offer unlikely and evocative comparisons, enhancing their choices with respect to dimensions such as character and subtext.

Additionally, I suggest students consider alternative forms of writing as another means of listening. While prose is the most obvious approach to writing in the college classroom (and usually preferred by teachers and students), students might find poetry, for instance, a more compelling way to story their experience. In her work performing the stories of others, performance ethnographer Anna Deavere Smith (1993) reveals how everyday discourse is "something that is like poetry .

. . . where ‘character’ lives” (p. xxxi): “Over time, I would learn to listen for those wonderful moments when people spoke a kind of personal music, which left a rhythmic architecture of who they were. I would be much more interested in those rhythmic architectures than in the information they might or might not reveal” (2001, p. 36). Beyond thinking of poetry as a rigid form, the poetic renders a world of heightened feeling—the emotional texture and depth of human interaction—“providing a richer sense of the presenting body. . . . for entering into and reporting what the body might know” (Pelias, 2008, p. 191). Thus, poetry on the page mirrors the poetry of both lived experience and the live performance that captures what it can of the former.

Finally, while listening is often characterized as leaning in closer, heightening one’s connection to what is being said, one can also effectively listen by taking a step back. To facilitate this distance between the performer and that which they performed, I provide students with digital recordings of their work, asking them to offer snapshots of their experiences—not their intentions, but the *performances that actually occurred*. Not only does reflecting on specific voice and body work bring awareness of such kinds of choices, it also allows for students to explore the “gaps” in their performance: those moments that went one way in rehearsal, but played out differently in front of an audience. While working from memory (in lieu of recordings) is certainly acceptable, or sometimes all that is accessible, memory is fallible. Further, while my intention is not to discount how performers feel about their experiences, providing concrete evidence offers students a lens for further investigation—fleshing out performative experience by *listening* through language.

The following excerpt illustrates a student working at the level of descriptive and analytical evaluation. Note how she creates aesthetic distance from the performance by using third person point of view, as well as her poetic choices in terms of formatting and repetition.

*She stands in one spot.*

*She rambles.*

*She stutters and stumbles as she tries to remember her lines.*

*She closes her eyes a lot.*

*She is nervous.*

*She gasps slightly for breath to remain calm, before returning to  
rambling.*

*She forgets the body, offering a slight and strained hand gesture to  
offer a visual of where things are located.*

*She never moves from that one spot!*

*She rushes through, slowing down for the parts she knew she had*

*memorized to perfection.*

*She adds as much detail as possible so the audience would feel like they were there in the room.*

*She learns that more doesn't always mean better.*

*She needs more rehearsal.*

## Write Vulnerably

Performing is vulnerable; standing on stage—even in silence—is to bare one's self to an interpreting audience. In their training manual on improvisation (perhaps the most vulnerable of the performing arts), Salinsky and Frances-White (2008/2013) note:

Shakespeare knew that questioning characters were characters who were not in possession of all the information and therefore sometimes unsure, and that this made them vulnerable. Improvisers do not enjoy being vulnerable because people do not enjoy being vulnerable. If we don't enjoy being vulnerable offstage, we are unlikely to welcome the feeling when a crowd of people are looking at us. We, as improvisers, are in the unique position of having to choose vulnerability. (p. 289)

Similarly, writers who choose vulnerability choose to exercise what great performers respect: "To be nakedly human is to believe that such displays link us deeply to our core" (Pelias, 2014, p. 188). Writing vulnerably is to compose that which is affective, that which is affected, that which affects, to wear one's heart on a textual sleeve, to reveal what we conceal, to risk judgment, dismissal, embrace.

The next example is from a student who, also writing poetically, utilizes two senses to describe his monologue about a formative moment that, at the age of thirteen, he cites marks the end of his childhood. His creation of sensorial metaphors serves as a subtextual map of his causal, two-part narrative arc: from the disbelief, embarrassment, and powerlessness of riding in the car with his mother on a quest to catch his stepfather in an indiscretion, to a cold, cynical indifference of what it means to grow up and no longer see parents (or the world) through innocent eyes.

*Silence: The sound of nothing at all. Auditory darkness. Deaf echoes that give way to an inaudible scream. Mute and shock, suppression and rage, building, together, an explosion, a suspension of time, the suspension of disbelief, numbness, emptiness, fullness, and yet nothingness . . .*

*Sharpness: A point of incision, the breaking of skin, the bubbling of blood. The discomfort—sliced, pierced, jagged, punctured, fractured. Brokenness attempting to put itself back together again. The damage—a wound, a scar, the shards, forever broken . . .*

Another student engages sense memory to more fully understand her identity. Specifically, she reconstructs the relationship with her deceased grandmother and, in so doing, reveals the impact of family on her love for food.

*Mint chocolate chip is my absolute favorite ice cream, and I cannot eat it without my grandma coming to mind. She loved her strawberry shortcake, too. Every time I would visit her, she always had the ingredients to make it. My Grandma was what you would call a “food pusher.” Most grandmas are. You could not even be hungry for the tiniest crumb, but somehow, she always had something else to eat. “Are you still hungry? I have cookies, strawberry short cake, and mint chocolate chip ice cream.”*

*Food is the great connector in my family, and it hasn’t taken me that long to figure it out either. Some of my all-time favorite foods are from my Grandma’s recipes, like corn bread casserole, which you always knew she was making by the savory smell wafting from the kitchen. It was one of the first recipes she ever taught me how to make, and I still remember how to make it to this day, without a written recipe in front of me. We cooked all the time. Many a winter break was spent with her, and we would always cook the foods we liked, or we would go out to get Chinese food because my aunt that lives close to her hates Chinese food. [. . .] One thing my Grandma always taught me was to love myself, no matter what.*

## Write to Personify

Without a body, there is no writer, no writing. Without a body, there is no performer, no performing. According to Ladrón de Guevara (2011), a performer inhabits six bodies—the textual body, the lived body, the ecstatic (or fleshly) body, the recessive (or visceral) body, the unnatural body, and the imagined body—noting: “A body always is, to a certain extent, indefinable . . . formed of a series of different elements that are combined, interrelated and, often, difficult to distinguish from one another” (p. 22). Graver (1997) also addresses the “ontological complexity” (p. 222) of the actor’s body, and while noting three valuable distinctions—interiority, exteriority, and autonomy—it is worth, in this context, detailing the first two:



A body's interior [emphasis added] hides its unseen, volitional mechanisms, the motivating forces that drive its observable behaviors. A body's exterior [emphasis added] presents its image to the world, but this image is not self-contained. It is marked, at least in part, as consequent in appearance or activity upon the character or developments of the body's interiority. (p. 222)

Graver's and Ladrón de Guevara's observations shed light on the actor's body as a network, despite the body's abstract, manifold, and contested nature. Writing, thus, becomes both a body and an act of the body—a way to personify the performer (and performance) in its multiplicity, allowing students to give shape, color, and texture to how (and what) they experienced on stage as well as how (and what) they experience *as they write*.

The following excerpt does more than just write the student's performing body on stage: she writes her subjectivity and the representation of her body. In her writing to more fully humanize herself as part of her fieldwork experience, she, too, engages vulnerably, acknowledging what was missing in her staged interpretation of church culture—a perspective she had hoped to script, but did not.

*I wanted to take the audience on a mental fieldtrip of my fieldwork to churches. I focused on three different locations on stage, each representing a different church. [. . .] I also wanted to touch on the difference in rituals of the churches based on denominations and how their atmospheres were similar but still very different.*

*[. . .]*

*I do feel as though my energy and physical transitions from church to church helped me out a little to keep the audience awake and follow me from location to location. I showed how people were acting in services [. . .] how exaggerated some of the members at church could be when they heard the music playing. The audience seemed engaged because they began to respond with a head nod, smirk, or slight laughter, but it still wasn't enough for me. I feel as though I failed.*

*I really wanted the audience to feel a sense of not being comfortable in their own skin in a church setting. I wanted to show them how tough it was to go to church as a bisexual, tomboyish female. Even though I thought I dressed the part in real life, I fear I gave off the vibe of showing interest in women. Hearing a pastor preach about sin and how being gay is one of them was uncomfortable. For whatever reasons I got overwhelmed and could not get out the main points that I wanted to portray. I was way too wordy about things*



*that the audience did not necessarily need to know. I feel as though I wasn't in the right mindset and I wasn't sure how to overcome the emotions that I was feeling to tackle the performance.*

*While performing, I felt embarrassment and nervousness. I felt as though the audience could see me thinking of what I wanted to say but didn't, and so I stumbled over my words a lot. My performance did not totally match my fieldwork and while performing I forgot the importance of my research. I thought one thing but showed something different. I was just happy to have gotten through the performance.*

## Write to Reimagine

Writing will always fall short when it comes to storying performance. “Performance,” Phelan (1993) claims, “occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as ‘different.’ The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present” (p. 146). Of course, in order to discuss a particular performance, students must make reference to said performance, but if writing is to embrace performance’s inherent fleetingness, students should cultivate reimagination over mimicry. Zinder’s (2009) actor training includes three components—body, voice, imagination, in that order. “Of all the actor’s tools,” he writes, “the imagination is the most powerful and complex, but at the same time it is the most difficult to tap into or hold onto” (2009, p. 4). Similarly challenging, writing to reimagine is to take an existing scene and infuse it with new life, constructing a new world without abandoning the former, to articulate what could not have been communicated by performance itself, to discover what makes the performative moment—then and now—possible.

While beginning with a context for his work and the intentions behind his staging choices, the writer of the following excerpt uses the page to generate additional associations about his closeted gay identity and his first sexual experience—with a woman. In this reimagining, he creates an internal monologue, taking himself deeper into both the performed moment on stage as well as the narrative within the moment.

*After years of angst and confusion, admitting to myself that I was in fact gay was one of the hardest realities I have had to face. All through my teenage years, I acted as I was socially trained. I dated girls, went to prom, and tried to behave as a normal, heterosexual*

*teenager was supposed to behave. I remember wanting to try out for cheerleader so badly, but that was not something a boy does in Alabama, so I never did.*

[. . .]

*Monica was a few years older than me, and quite a bit more mature. She had her own apartment, which is where we spent most of our time, ordering pizza and watching videos. After we had been dating for some time, it became obvious that it was time to take our relationship to the next level. Tonight would be our first time. It would be my first time.*

*This is it. This is what you've been waiting for. C'mon! Relax! Why are you so nervous?*

*Ok. This is fine. This is good. You can do this. You can . . .*

*Ok. Just relax. Enjoy yourself. This is supposed to be fun, right?*

*Ok. Here we go. Now. Think of something sexy. What's that movie we watched the other night? Cruel Intentions. Yeah. Sarah Michelle Gellar is hot. Oh, that scene where she's by the pool and she drops her towel and isn't wearing a bathing suit . . . wait . . . that was Ryan Phillippe. Why the fuck are you thinking of Ryan Phillippe at a time like this?!*

[. . .]

*My performance is an attempt to allow the audience to step inside my mind and feel the confusion and physical pain that resulted from the denial of myself. By intermittently breaking down and building up the imaginary wall between myself and the audience, I am able to tell a story that the audience can feel a part of. It is my intention that the audience is able to laugh at the neuroses of a confused teenager and possibly remind them of a time when their head and heart disagreed.*

"But theater, as we all know," Zinder (2009) reminds us,

is an instantly perishable art, so beyond making the creative moment appear, we also have to learn how to seize it before it vanishes . . . and learn how to manage the riches we have mined in order to give form to the products of our creative imagination. (pp. 11-12)

Performative writing grants entry to performance's "riches." Performance educators and practitioners have long understood the necessity and importance of the body,

and reflecting on performance through writing is another way of refiguring that presence in all of its intricacy. Like performance, writing requires training “until it becomes a habit” (Zinder, 2009, p. 9)—performative writing, in particular, is not “a matter of ‘anything goes’” (Pollock, 1998, p. 80), nor is it a matter of skill level. What it is, however, is active, disciplined engagement with writing as a process of discovery. A threshold indeed, writing often begets performance and performance often begets writing. While some students would rather leave what happens on stage there, saving writing for the English classroom, I am convinced by Pollock (1998), who urges: “To write performance is not in and of itself a betrayal. Rather . . . the betrayal consists in not writing it, in conceding to the deployment of language against performance and so to the absence/death of performance in processes of knowledge formation” (p. 79).

Artists must question themselves—their choices, their processes. The same is true of writing itself. In “Becoming Writing, Becoming Writers,” Colyar (2009) addresses writing as academic currency, generative, a reflection of the rhetorical self, sense making, and methodology—ultimately “a source of possibility rather than simply mechanical drudgery” (p. 435). Reframing writing, for students and for ourselves, is a necessity if we are to understand how writing functions in the performing arts. My approach to this work represents *a* way, not necessarily *the* way. Students may or may not find the particular writing strategies herein useful to their creative process, choosing instead other writing approaches. Regardless, what matters is that they write. While training is only as effective as much as the trainee is invested, training is also only as effective as the trainer. In other words, if we as educators present writing as integral to performing—and not ancillary—our students will broaden their understanding of *where* and *how* performance happens, enhance their artistic sensibilities and possibilities, and generate more critical, insightful, multidimensional, and inspired reflections from stage to page.

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