

Devising in Hawai'i: The Efficacy of a Eurocentric Methodology with BIPOC Students

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In the autumn of 2021, as part of my dissertation research at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, I, along with my creative partner Kat Rothman, facilitated a devised theatre project with the drama class at Waipahu High School in O‘ahu, assisted by the school’s drama teacher. The research aimed to assess whether, as a result of engaging in devised theatre, the students experienced any shifts in their outlooks on learning and their sense of self-agency. Agency, in this context, refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn 2001, 112), the understanding that an individual is the initiator of their actions (Tapal et al. 2017, 1552), the capacity to impact and eventually transform an individual’s life circumstances and practices in which they are engaged (Rainio 2010, 5), and the concept of ownership of the ideals of individual choice, freedom, intentionality, empowerment and cultural transformation (Lehtonen 2015, 1887). These students are almost entirely of Hawaiian, Oceanic, and Southeast Asian descent, and we, the devising facilitators, are White-passing and from the continental United States. Hawai‘i, of course, has a long history of colonialism that devastated the Kānaka Maoli population (the indigenous people of Hawai‘i), along with much of their history, language, and culture, resulting in present-day illegal military occupation, harmful tourism practices, food insecurity, high costs of living, and climate change (Aikau and Gonzalez 2019; Lili‘uokalani 2011; Silva 2004). For two artists such as ourselves who embody in our artistry, pedagogy, and physical presence the Eurocentric culture that has caused so much harm to the Kānaka Maoli, asking these students to express vulnerability through devising had the potential to stir trauma. In this article, I will discuss some of the challenges we faced in bringing this Western theatre methodology into a BIPOC classroom, and I will make the case that, despite those challenges, the process was overall beneficial to the students, primarily because we gave them as much control as possible over the creative processes.

Devised theatre is often praised for celebrating cultural differences as assets, and indeed, there are many celebrated BIPOC devised theatre artists. Much of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed methodology is employed within devised rehearsal rooms; in Hawai‘i, T-Shirt Theatre Company has been devising with young people for twenty years, and over the last decade at the University of Hawai‘i, quite a few Kānaka Maoli students have presented works utilizing a wide variety of devising methodologies. However, the reality is that devising comes from a Eurocentric theatre tradition, and most professional devised theatre companies in the United States today are made up of a majority of White practitioners. As such, the inclusivity promised by devised theatre

advocates is in question. Western theatre itself holds a complicated place in Hawai‘i; despite the endurance (and since the 1970s a growing resurgence) of traditional Hawaiian performance forms, as a lasting result of colonization, theatre in Hawai‘i has been dominated by Western forms throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This is why artist scholars like Tammy Haili‘ōpua Baker (2019) and Kiki Rivera (2019) contend that the Hawaiian community would be better served by learning their own performance forms rather than another Western one. So, given the student population I was working with, was devised theatre ultimately a beneficial learning strategy?

We began our process by asking the students to address the prompt, “What does the world need to know right now?” We employed strategies from Viewpoints (Bogart and Landau 2004), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 2021), and Tectonic Theatre (Kaufman and McAdams 2018), as well as a unique dramaturgical process of my design. This involved having the students periodically pause to analyze and seek patterns in their generated work to create their own dramaturgical questions to guide their creative expression (Poblete 2022, 83). They then used these questions to edit and refine their material to arrive at a cohesive show. By giving the students as much control as possible, including allowing them to direct and make all design choices, I argue there was minimal artistic influence from myself, my co-facilitator, and the classroom teacher.

The show they created, entitled *Our Legacy*, is eclectic in terms of content, theme, and aesthetic. It overall follows the journey of a teenaged life, going from the simplicity of youth to complications of what happens after graduation, featuring pieces exploring topics such as peer pressure, cyberbullying, romantic cheating, bathroom etiquette, and homophobic bigotry.



A scene from *Our Legacy*.

My friend Sean-Joseph Choo, a Hawaiian theatre practitioner, identified several Hawaiian cultural through lines throughout the show. For example, he believes that the bookends of *Our Legacy*, an elderly woman looking back at her high school yearbook, is an example of exploring nostalgia, a common theme he observes in contemporary local Hawaiian theater. He also saw clear influences from prominent Hawaiian comedic artists throughout the show:

I cannot help but think of my own family's sense of humor, as well as historically the teasing and integration of different peoples on the plantation that created local culture, as well as the comedians that came out of all that (Rap Reiplinger,¹ Booga Booga,² Frank Delima,³ Andy Bumatai,⁴ Kauai Hill AKA Bu La'ia,⁵ Da Braddahs,⁶ Tumua Tuinei,⁷ etc.). I wondered if the rich history of comedy, specifically sketch comedy, has some direct connection with the struggle and hilarity that came from different cultures trying to communicate and sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, and whether these moments and styles of vignettes/slice-of-life stem from the lived experiences of the ancestors here. (Sean-Joseph Choo, interview by author, Honolulu, August, 2022)

Importantly, not only did we the facilitators not introduce the work of these artists to the students, we hadn't heard of most of them. *Our Legacy* also features clear Filipino cultural elements. The classroom teacher, who is Filipino, observed several examples throughout, such as

a family scene featuring an aggressive auntie interrogating her nephew about whether he has a girlfriend in school. All of these observations come from adults who analyzed the students’ work rather than from the students themselves: I do not believe the students were consciously aware of invoking these cultural elements; they were simply expressing themselves. But the fact that these moments appear in the show suggests to me that the students had quite a lot of agency over their creative processes. In fact, the students demonstrated increased agency and a positive shift in their outlooks on learning throughout the rehearsal process, as well as a stronger sense of agency over their lives more broadly (as demonstrated by data presented in Poblete 2022, see Figure 1 below for an example). Here is one student’s reflection:

It was a bit scary at first, especially for people who didn’t really know what was going on, who are new to drama, and people who are not really good at socializing. But as more activities went by and the more we started having fun with it, I was like, how chill the energy was. We felt like we could be able to breathe and just express ourselves really in the way – it was like art ... Like you guys expected very much of us because you have that much faith in us ... Overall, it was a great learning experience and great for personal growth, and not just with being an actor, but also like learning how to be a better person (Student, interview by author, Waipahu, December, 2021).

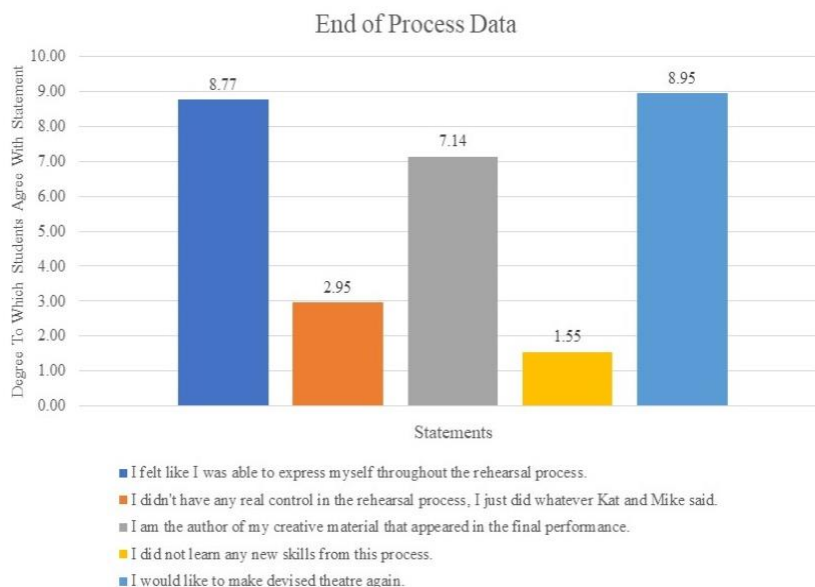


Figure 1: Exit surveys indicate that the students felt a high degree of ownership over their work (Poblete 2022, 178).

As White-passing instructors from the continental United States, the challenges we faced as facilitators in understanding and crossing the cultural barriers in these two classrooms were

considerable. At one point, the classroom teacher indicated that the language I used impacted the rehearsal room:

I think it's just a terminology thing. Because you're White, the language that you use among your White peers would center around certain kinds of words. I'm not White, but I get it. But for the students, they haven't had exposure to that kind of language unless they watch *Friends*. Because, Mike, you seriously sound like a character on *Friends* (Classroom Teacher, interview by author, Waipahu, May, 2021).

There was also a lot to consider in how we approached this community in the first place and the process we underwent to be welcomed into this project. I had taken several courses at the University of Hawai'i on Hawaiian language, political science, history, and theatre, and I took part in several Hawaiian arts projects at our University and out in the community. These experiences contributed to my earning a recommendation from the head of our Hawaiian Theatre Program to work in the community on my own, as well as an invitation into Waipahu High School. We attempted to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology, such as an ŌiwiCrit critical race theory (Wright and Balutski 2016) which emphasizes elements of kuleana (right, privilege, concern, responsibility), mo'okū'auhau (genealogy), aloha 'āina (love of the land or of one's country, patriotism, particularly within a Hawaiian context), and hūnā (sacred, hidden). In some ways, we succeeded in incorporating these methodologies. However, for various reasons primarily related to time and resources, we failed in most ways. Still, despite those failures, the efforts to educate ourselves and respect Indigenous learning methodologies did seem to come through to the students in subtle ways. Most importantly, the classroom teacher, well-known and respected by all the students involved, was with us every step of the way.

Undoubtedly, elements of the process must have seemed irrelevant and colonial to the students. For example, because I believed the students would benefit from viewing "canonical" devised work, at the beginning of the rehearsal process we screened several videos of devised performances from the United Kingdom and Germany. However, the students responded much more strongly to the performances of local Hawaiian artists. It is little wonder, as Europe is on the other side of the planet from Hawai'i, and the cultural relevance of several of the screened pieces was not only dubious but, again, entrenched in a Eurocentric tradition that had the potential to stir cultural trauma.

Reflecting upon these concerns at the end of the rehearsal process, I asked the classroom teacher about the role of devising as a methodology in her classroom and if she felt a praxis modeled after a Hawaiian theatre tradition like Hana Keaka, a Chinese form like Jingju, or a Filipino form like Duplo would have been more relevant and effective with the students. She felt that our devising process, although Eurocentric in its design, was received well:

I think my kids; if you say those theatre forms, they'll be like, "What? I don't know." ... And maybe the Asian kids will be like, "Oh, I know what that is." Because it's something that their parents know of or have taken them to. So, I want to say that devised theatre is – I can only speak for my demographic of students, my Gen Z kids in my district school – they're more familiar with this kind of skit work or improvisation work, not Hawaiian/Polynesian styles (Classroom Teacher in discussion with the author, December 2021).

She believes that although the devising methodology itself and the most prominent artists who practice it are of different cultures than her students, the storytelling they are most exposed to is Western, and as a result, our methodology was in many ways familiar and did indeed resonate with them. Looking back at Sean-Joseph Choo's analysis of the students' play, the local comedic artists he named draw deeply from their own Hawaiian culture and genealogy in their work, but the formats generally follow Western sketch-comedy structures. Hawaiian artists routinely reference Hawaiian *and* Western storytelling in contemporary performance. For example, Tammy Haili'ōpua Baker (2020) discusses the efficacy of Pidgin Theatre for Kānaka Maoli expression, a form that is neither Hana Keana nor Western dramatic theatre but a hybrid of both. This is not to say that theatre methodologies more entrenched in the students' own cultures might not serve them better. But, based on the data, feedback from the classroom teacher and the students' families, and my anecdotal observations, the students in this class seemed to enjoy our devising process and get a lot out of it.

Ultimately, I believe that devised theatre educators throughout the United States must do better at incorporating global storytelling methodologies into our processes; I am no exception. But I also argue that a devised theatre process aimed at giving its participants as much control as possible can benefit BIPOC communities under the right circumstances. However, creating these circumstances is complicated, involving a deep consideration of consent-based practices and cultural competency. For brevity, I will focus on only four points.

My first recommendation is to allow as much time for the process as possible. Devising can involve allowing students to work as directors, playwrights, actors, designers, technical

supervisors, and producers, which takes time. So does responsibly honoring the knowledge frameworks that shape the students' worldviews. For example, Tewa author Gregory A. Cajete (1994) emphasizes that a common characteristic of Indigenous education is a discussion-heavy learning environment where students learn through stories told many times from different perspectives (213-214). Roderick Jay Spaulding (2010) argues that in contrast to Indigenous learning frameworks, Western education moves far too quickly, a symptom of information being separated from the places and people from which it is derived (24-25). This is one of the ways we failed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology: we lacked the time to allow sufficient space for our teachings to be contextualized within the students' backgrounds and learning frameworks.

My second recommendation is to bring in local artists and educators to allow students to learn artistic expression from members of their community. We brought in a local Sāmoan performer toward the end of the project to help solidify some of our improv teachings; if we had more time, we would have brought him in earlier into the process, along with other artists who had expressed interest in working with us but who found it challenging to schedule around our rehearsal calendar. This, too, is a way in which we failed to incorporate Indigenous knowledge frameworks into our methodology.

My third recommendation is to consider the exit strategy. If practitioners provide participants with tools and a platform to express their stories, what happens when the project ends? The facilitation of a temporary emotional bond resulting from the collaboration of young artists and the subsequent disbanding of that bond can be particularly dangerous in Indigenous communities where, again, expressions of vulnerability can often stir legacies of cultural trauma. Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton (2009) emphasize that in exiting from an applied theatre process, facilitators are ethically bound to create an action plan that aims to continue the process following their departure (196). Because this project took place in a high school and we were working with a longstanding theatre teacher, the negative effects of our departure were not felt as acutely as if we were the sole facilitators. We kept in contact with that teacher, and several months after the end of the project we were invited back to serve as judges for their spring showcase, a performance of original spoken word poetry. The students were delighted to see us again and made us feel very welcome. By remaining in the community and letting the students know that we still

care about them, we hope that we mitigated any distress caused by breaking any emotional bonds between them and ourselves.

My final recommendation is to allow the students as much control over the devising process as possible. We were clearly from a very different culture from the students, but the project was a success nonetheless because we allowed them to express themselves on their own terms, and in so doing, they brought elements to the process that were foreign to us. This involved letting them fail, both academically and artistically. For example, at one point, a group of students performed a half-baked piece for the rest of the class; they simply hadn't put any effort into it. We did not admonish them or offer artistic critique but rather let the other students provide feedback that not only allowed them to conclude that they had to work harder but also guided them in improving the piece within a context that made sense to them.

There will always be cultural barriers when educators teach outside their community. Nonetheless, I believe that a constructive exchange of ideas is always achievable, so long as the educators are as conscious as possible of the barriers and see those differences as learning opportunities because those barriers are always clear to the students.

¹ Rap Reiplinger rose to prominence as a prolific Hawaiian comedian in the early 1980s; his cultural influence is considered part of the second Hawaiian Renaissance.

² Booga Booga was one of the most popular Hawaiian comedy groups in the 1970s and 1980s, famous for their special brand of "Kanakan Comedy." The original members of the Booga Booga comedy group were Rap Reiplinger, Ed Kaahea, and James Grant Benton.

³ Frank Delima is an influential Hawaiian comedian. He is known for invoking his diverse ethnic background in his act as a microcosm for the diversity of Hawai'i (he of is Portuguese, Hawaiian, Irish, Chinese, English, Spanish, and Scottish descent).

⁴ Andy Bumatai is a Hawaiian actor, stand-up comedian, television host, and producer. He has created a number of TV specials for Hawai'i's KGMB-TV, most notably *High School Daze* and *All in the Ohana*.

⁵ Kauī Hillis, AKA Bu La'ia, is a Hawaiian comedian known for his use of Pidgin and for wearing a large wig and blacking out one of his front teeth while performing. He starred in a cable television show in the early 1990s and attained fame when he ran for governor of Hawai'i in 1994.

⁶ Active since 2002, Hawaiian comedians James Roche and Tony Silva are famous for their live performances as well as their ongoing television show as the duo Da Braddahs.

⁷ A newcomer to the Hawaiian comedy scene, Tumua Tuinei is a former University of Hawai'i at Mānoa football player, who is inspiring a new generation of Hawaiians.

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