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*Original Paper*

## Story-Circle Processes: Mining Personal Stories for Devised Productions

Anthony Tassa

Professor of Theatre, American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

### Abstract

This paper introduces participants to techniques originally developed by actor-artist John Oneal of the Junebug Theatre in New Orleans that are utilized in creating devised theatre productions concerning selected themes. It explores story collection processes and exploration of detailed personal stories utilized in developing two theatrical presentations. The student-actors who participated in implementing these techniques were a blend of local and expatriate communities in the United Arab Emirates. Discovering one's self, one's history, one's past, as well as one's connection to a viable future were at the forefront of the project. The first theatre piece discussed was presented at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates from November 8 through 15, 2016. The piece continued its development until it reopened at the American University of Sharjah First International Theatre Festival on February 2, 2017. The second theatre piece discussed was presented at the American University of Sharjah from November 7-13, 2018, and was remounted for the AUS Second International Theatre Festival on February 4, 2019. The Story-Circle processes are suitable for educators interested in exploring story-collection techniques, and translating those techniques into artistic production. These experiences foster a sense of community and shared experiences through story-sharing.

**Keywords:** Arts, Avant-Garde, Communication, Drama, Theatre

### Introduction

I first encountered John Oneal of the Junebug Theatre Company as a faculty member at Palm Beach Community College in West Palm Beach, Florida in 2000. Mr. Oneal presented his work for the community and offered workshops in the Story-Circle process. It is a means of story collection he had spent decades developing and mastering. He guided myself and those involved in the workshops through extensive sessions on how to properly run the Story-Circle, as well as how to maintain and present stories following collection. I quickly discovered the intricate nature of the process and how it truly allows people to fully explore past experiences and share them in a safe, comfortable, and nurturing environment. With Mr. Oneal's expert guidance, I gathered a team of students who began collecting stories from the Florida civil rights movement and recording them as part of Mr. Oneal's story-line project based out of New Orleans. We then utilized several of those stories in developing a piece of theatre entitled, *Colorblind*. The piece was presented at Palm Beach Community College in 2001 and received an invitation for presentation as part of the Florida Theatre Festival in Lakeland, Florida, in the USA. This experience greatly influenced my work in devised theatre, and I have regularly utilized the process in developing original works with student casts. The pieces to be discussed include a devised theatre work entitled, *Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys*, which explored stories centered on the theme of one's cultural identity. The second is my most recent devised theatre production, *Cirkus*, which utilized the story-collection process to develop a work with a specific plot scenario in mind. The primary theme of the latter was personal discovery.

The Story-Circle process at face-value is quite simple. Everyone sits evenly in a circle with no physical obstructions. The facilitator introduces him/herself and the Story-Circle method. Participants then introduce themselves in turn. A time is set for stories, based upon the number of people present, the length of the total session, and saving 8 to 10 minutes for closing crosstalk. A time-keeper for the group

is set. The facilitator will keep time when the time-keeper tells a story. The facilitator then tells a personal story to begin the process. Each person, in turn, has an opportunity to tell a story, or they may pass to the next person. No crosstalk is permitted until all stories have been shared. When a person has approximately 45 seconds left, the time-keeper will simply raise a hand to alert them that their time is drawing to a close. A person who has taken more time should not end their story abruptly, but be allowed to finish. Stories should come from personal experiences, not be opinions or fictional anecdotes. Each person should tell the most personal story that comes to mind. Once the circle has been traversed, all those who passed may tell a story if they wish. The group may decide to go around a second time and delve even deeper for more personal stories. At the conclusion of the Story-Circle, crosstalk begins. Crosstalk should be comments, questions, or realizations regarding stories that have been told, not the telling of more stories. No single person should dominate the crosstalk, but it should be shared equally. It is up to the facilitator to make sure procedures are followed. Optimal size of the group is between 6-10 individuals.

*The basic ground rules of the Story-Circle:*

- Everyone should sit evenly in a circle with no physical obstructions.
- Active listening is more important than talking.
- Each member of the circle does not have to like the story being told, but must respect each individual's right to tell a story.
- Do not plan stories in advance. Go with the deepest, most personal story that emerges as your turn arrives.
- Stay within the time limit set for stories.
- Each member may pass on telling a story the first time around, but is encouraged to share a story on the second round.
- Anything told in the Story-Circle, stays in the Story-Circle.

This process would be instrumental in developing both *Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys* in fall 2016 and *Cirkus* in fall 2018, theatre productions at the American University of Sharjah.

### **Body**

The theatre program at AUS develops a devised theatre piece every two years as part of a production presentation rotation. For fall 2016, the piece was titled, *Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys*, and was written from zero by the ensemble. The work began through several Story-Circle process sessions, which were designed to delve deeply into the students' personal stories to assist them in making discoveries about their respective cultural identities (the theme of the project), as well as instilling a respect and appreciation for other backgrounds and cultures. The ultimate goal would be to collect stories for each actor's individual monologue development for the theatrical production. Over the course of two weeks, the group met three times per week for three hours. In total, this amounted to 18-hours of Story-Circle sessions, which were utilized to build material for production creation.

During the initial round of stories in sessions one and two, many of the students passed on their first go; however, as the process continued to make its way around the circle again, each of those students in turn were able to share a story. While some stories were clearly more superficial than others, the students eventually gave over to the entire process and began to share personal stories that could be of great use in developing a piece of theatre.

One student, Hussain Fakhruddin of Pakistani origin, commented, "the story circle helped to jog my memory and go back in time not just to tell the story but to get a sense of how I felt at that time. This enabled me to channel all the emotions into my material and guided me into the direction my section went and what I wanted to talk about (Hussain Fakhruddin)."

Another student, Poojitha Pillamari from India, stated, "I found it useful in helping me open myself up, in putting to words ideas about myself that I probably had thought about but never really articulated, and also prompting myself to talk about subjects that I wouldn't have discussed in other social settings.

I understood the value of being vulnerable in a controlled environment, and worked out how to channel that vulnerability into my writing and performance (Poojitha Pillamari).”

Not all participants felt the Story-Circle process was useful in searching for material. Hysum Ismail, a recent AUS alumni from India who was working on the piece, stated, “I didn’t feel much personally. I felt like the story circle went on for too many rehearsals. I ran out of stories and I often found that people were telling stories that was expected from them as opposed to actually discover something new.” Although, Hysum later stated that the Story-Circle process “...helped me better understand the people in the group (Hysum Ismail).”

Other students had varying levels of success. The process did produce enough thoughtful material from which a theatrical production could be developed. It also assisted in creating a sense of bonding, a cohesive ensemble atmosphere, which established the trust necessary for properly improvising in the staging process.

Hysum added this about the Story-Circle process: “I think it helped in finding a kind of tonal symmetry with other people in the group. Connecting my own culture and stories to figure out how they relate to each other (Hysum Ismail).”

Once the stories were explored, the students then had individual homework projects. They had to take one of their stories, or a combination of stories and craft a monologue to be physically explored by the group. This work would be conducted during a scheduled one-week break from university. Upon returning from the break, all of the students had a piece that was useful in taking theatrical production to its next step. The ensemble members each began to read their stories aloud one at a time, and the ensemble was able to physically explore each story in the rehearsal hall; the reader played the role of narrator in each case. The narrator was actively involved in the physicality of the work, but was primarily responsible for execution of the text.

Physically exploring stories is another aspect in the process of taking stories from the circle to the stage. The ensemble utilized group movement exercises. These exercises included improvising movement on selected images from the text being spoken. They also included actually staging scenes to serve as locational backdrops for various pieces.

An important exercise in the physical development of stories was one entitled, *The Chord*, which was originally developed by the Living Theatre in the 1950s and 1960s. According to theatre historian Oscar Brockett, the Living Theatre was “Originally interested in poetic drama and non-realistic production techniques, during the 1950s they came under the influence of both Artaud and Brecht.” Brockett adds, “By the late 1960s it would be one of the world’s most controversial companies (Brockett 573).” Their physical exercises still push the boundaries of what is considered mainstream in theatrical training.

I had the pleasure of learning this and other exercises from Elena Jendova, a director with The Living Theatre, while I was a young graduate student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This exercise requires the ensemble to develop one breath. The breath then expands into a hum. That in turn evolves into a group “aah.” The exercise is about creating a unified voice with each step of the chord’s build. The chord eventually builds to a vocal crescendo before it either reverses course to its origin, or can explode at its height. I often utilize this sense of explosion to launch actors into an expelling of the text in a sound poem. This was particularly useful in developing *Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys*. It proved an excellent vehicle for launching the cast into their stories. The group also implemented rhythm and sound exercises as each of the individual stories was explored.

The crafted stories and their physical representations ultimately offered a tremendous amount of variation. One story was about a young lady who originally thought she was adopted and wanted her mother to tell her who her real mother was back in Sudan. It turned out that she was not indeed adopted but had been told that by her sister, and she had never asked her mother about it. The physical realization of the scene allowed the actors to play roles of mother, daughter, and other characters who might have existed within those circumstances. It turned into a charming and gentle moment of theatre.

Another student, Husam Badi, presented a story about his heritage, relating details concerned with

being a descendent of a warrior class from Pakistan. He shared what that meant to him and how he could summon strength from his own cultural history.

The following passage is an excerpt from his monologue. The stage directions were added during the rehearsal process:

Husam: I come from the northern territories of Pakistan. (Rubab music) Of the land of beautiful meadows, mountains, and lakes.

An image of one warrior appears on screen.

Husam: And of the brave hearted, well built, head strong people known as Pukhtana, or the Pashtoon people. The warrior race.

An image of numerous warriors appears on screen. The actors playing warriors pull swords and make a slashing movement and sound.

Husam: But I am a diaspora kid. I belong as equally to the UAE.

Actors begin to fill the stage, moving like falcons and camels.

Husam: ...born and raised. I was raised in the Garden City of the UAE, the quiet, calm city of Al Ain. Also known as the city of roundabouts.

Actors become cars, do two passes around Husam, then sit back down.

Husam: I am a product of its culture. So whether it is heeshi biladi, harees, saaloonat bedu, or the desert, I feel it and love it even more so.

(Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys)

Husam goes on to question who he is, the separation of where he comes from versus where he grew up, but recognizes that he is and always will be a part of his ancestry.

One young lady, Sunetra Gupta, talked about being from Bengali culture and the expectations heaped upon her for marriage. She shared a wonderfully lighthearted story concerning a Bengali cultural tradition that includes being offered a dead fish as a wedding present.

Sunetra: ...the groom and his family finally arrived with excited aunties pulling my cheeks coz I was the NRI kid but I didn't mind it so much because they brought gifts!!! Now you would expect the gifts to be expensive gold jewelry, clothes or even handbags but you're wrong again! In a Bengali wedding the main gift is a fish! (Cast: "Huh!?!")

An image of a fish dressed as a bride on a plate appears.

Sunetra: A dead fish! A large, dead fish.

Hakawati hands her a fish.

Sunetra: ...dressed as a groom or a bride because apparently, it's considered lucky. I am going to get a dead fish on my wedding and the only consolation is that it's wearing the same dress as me.

(Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys)

Probably the most poignant and personal story of the production came from Layan Abo Shkier, a Syrian student, who recalled cultural and culinary traditions from her home in Syria.

In the passage below from the devised text, she recollects lights of a city coming from a mountain, her childhood memory of them, and she ponders whether those "stars" are even there now:

Everyone goes upstage and starts city activity movements.

Layan: I remember "Kasyon" (Vivi sings) ...the great Syrian mountain that I call "mountain of the stars," because every night "Kasyon" was fully covered by lights.

Actors switch on electric candles

Lights of streets, lights of houses, lights of life. And when I was a kid I used to think that those lights were actual stars that leave the sky every night to encase “Kasyon” in a very beautiful image. An image that reminds me with that night long years ago, when I was staring to “Kasyon” wondering if it’s possible to take one of its stars as a gift for my aunt’s wedding. I still wonder whether those stars are still shining or not.

All: Home, Nation, Land.

(Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys)

Layan finished her piece by singing a Syrian lullaby, as she envisioned those who had been lost in the tragic and ongoing civil war. This piece was especially poignant as each actor on stage was given a candle to hold in memory of a Syrian citizen, then the actors collapsed in slow-motion to the sound of bombs, and the candles were extinguished as a shroud was placed over Layan’s head at the conclusion of the song. None of these stories could have been explored, none of them would have been discovered and ultimately shared, without the Story-Circle process.

Not all of the stories that were utilized in the actual production of Hiraeth: Theatrical journeys came from real experiences, however. Hysum Ismail and Ahmad Al Moosawi, both of whom did offer some interesting and insightful personal stories during the development process, decided to craft partially fictional stories that were loosely based upon real-life experiences. These particular stories added a lighthearted touch to the overall production. Hysum’s piece provided a wonderfully comic element, and included aspects from several different stories he had shared during the story-collection process. His story told of his waking up in hell and meeting the devil face to face. After a brief comical confrontation, the devil explained to him that many of the things he finds so difficult in the modern world, things that create panic and anxiety in him, such as no wifi or poor voice recognition systems, are only mild annoyances when compared to true suffering.

Ahmad Al Moosawi, a Kuwaiti student, presented a piece that was much more personal, though still embellished with fiction. It started with personal feeling about familial beliefs, but veered off into a fantasy battle sequence. His piece, like Hysum’s, offered a lighthearted element to the overall production, but more importantly exposed Ahmad’s vulnerability in dealing with often unrealistic familial expectations. Poojitha Pillamari was able to utilize her personal training as a classical Indian dancer in the production. She told a story about the meaning of her name, how it is often mispronounced, and the awkwardness with which this imbued her. What made the story so effective was its staging, as each movement of the dance was set to the text of the monologue, so that the poetry of the piece became its soundtrack.

Poojitha: Who am I? Am I the same person that people see? I suppose, it is a philosophical question that I’m not alone in struggling with. My name confuses me: “Poojitha.”

An image of a Classical Indian dancer appears on screen. Three cloths appear in front of her, blocking her path. They represent a sea of life-struggles.

Poojitha: I have never met another Poojitha, ever.

She moves past cloth one.

Poojitha: I have never felt a kinship with another person of the same name. I have never shared the feeling of having my name butchered by people who cannot articulate three simple syllables.

Another image appears as she moves past cloth two.

Poojitha: And those who do know how to say it probably know what it means too: a worshipped goddess. A worshipped goddess? Could there be a more obnoxious meaning to a name? I want to hide my face in embarrassment every time I have to explain that to someone.

Another image appears as she moves past cloth three.

Poojitha: Most people in my community know me as Poojitha, the Bharatanatyam dancer.

(Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys)



Figure 1. Photograph by Zuzana Tassa

Though each story explored the secondary theme of the piece, that of being a second-culture kid, Vivi Semaan, a young lady of Lebanese descent, had the most direct and personal story centered on the topic. Her piece explored the contradiction of being born and raised in a place to which one can never truly become a part.

Vivi: I am 100% Lebanese.

All: Lebnanya!

Image on screen as music begins to play. Actors form tree tableau.

Vivi: But the UAE is my home. This land is the only land that I know, it is the only one that I feel like I will ever know. 22 years ago, I was born here just like my mother was 43 years ago. We both saw the UAE grow decades apart.

First row walks around upstage of Vivi, doing cultural dance, something derivative of an Emirati dance.

Vivi: ...and with 2 different pairs of feet we walked the same soil.

Vivi reaches out to the ground and grabs the soil in her hands.

Vivi: Both of my grandfathers are buried under this soil, and walked it for many, many years. They were some of the firsts in the UAE, working alongside many pioneers in this young country some 45 years ago. Despite all this history, I am still a "resident."

Actors stop dancing and start walking towards Vivi.

Vivi: I am labeled no different than a person that has moved to the UAE for 2 months. Sometimes I feel like a chained patriot.

Actors facing US lock arms with Vivi creating tension. Vivi aggressively breaks free from the chains.

Vivi: I acknowledge I have Lebanese blood, but this is my home.

(Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys)

The theatrical piece was organized so each actor told a portion of their story in one moment and would continue their story in another manner later in the piece, or vice-versa. Other skills that students brought to the table were utilized in the staging of the production, such as dancing, singing, and tumbling.

In order to fully interconnect and present the seemingly random set of stories into one cohesive theatrical piece, the ensemble had to develop an encasement for them. As the group was developing this piece at a culturally eclectic university in the United Arab Emirates, the group decided to utilize a

character named Hakawati, an ancient Arab traditional story-teller, to weave them together.

In Arab culture, the traditional Hakawati "...is a person who tells stories about Arab heroes, usually in a coffee shop setting," states Dr. Fadi Fayad Skeiker. "Classically, the Hakawati assumed the role of the town crier and news correspondent during the Aljahelia period (the era before Islam) 200–600 CE. At the dawn of the Islamic era, between the sixth and eighth centuries, a new generation of Hakawati appeared whose role was to spread the story of the Islamic prophet Muhammad (Alsirah Alnboia). During the Middle Ages, storytellers told tales from Arab history. A new generation emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Skeiker 225)."



Figure 2. Photograph by Zuzana Tassa

The Hakawati in Hiraeth served as both a mystical figure and story-guide. She equally embodied nurturing and malevolent roles in the various stories. She was often invisible to the other performers and at times demonstrated the power of a Jinn, as she was able to magically transport the piece from one distant moment to another in a matter of seconds. She also utilized an Arabic drum and incense to dramatically intensify the character's mystical qualities.

The theme of cultural identity would prove to be a significant factor in aligning the stories and ensuring a unified story-telling production. Cultural Identity had been chosen as the primary theme for the American University of Sharjah First International Theatre Festival, and the theatre production was being constructed specifically for presentation at the festival. This devised theatre festival was presented in February 2017, and included guests from several US-based institutions: Clemson University, Texas Tech University, and Michigan State University, among others.

Each personal piece in Hiraeth: Theatrical Journeys was left with the open question, "Who am I?" As the monologues concluded, the students wandered the stage asking this question repeatedly of the audience members. They then began to recount their stories aloud each to themselves, all at once, and the ensemble realization was that by reinvesting in each story, every student could reach an epiphany.

The Story-Circle ultimately provided a wealth of personal stories, and allowed for greater interconnectivity within the ensemble. A family atmosphere had been created, which allowed a sense of comfort and freedom to abound, both within the rehearsal process and the production itself.

Hussain stated, "It allowed me to look at things from their perspective and knowing what identity, or lack thereof, meant to everyone showed the rest of us a part of them we didn't know. It also informed me about the actions or rituals of some cultures that are still going strong (Hussain Fakhruddin)."

Poojitha added, "The story circle helped us understand each other better, first as cast members and then as almost-family members. We were able to contribute to almost every story that was presented on stage, and since all of us participated in each other's story, we were able to play the right kind of

relevant roles in every story (Poojitha Pillamari).”

The piece wound down with the actors, the ensemble, wearing masks, a cadence being kept on the Arab drum played by Hakawati, reaching to the lighted sky, as they continued their quest to discover their own individuality and identity.

For myself, as facilitator of the Story-Circle process and director of the theatrical production, I was struck by the sense of camaraderie that so quickly developed for this ensemble. There was a nurturing and familial quality that bound these student-actors together as they worked towards a common goal.

In fall of 2018, I again utilized the Story-Circle process to develop a devised piece of theatre, Cirkus, but there were numerous diversions from the Hiraeth project. One casting requirement for Cirkus was that each actor had to be able to dance. The goal was to utilize personal stories and create fictional adaptations of them to be told by various circus performers. Each student had an act they had to recreate through dance. There was a trapeze artist, a high wire act, a lion-tamer, clowns and a ring-master. The main character of this fictional story, however, was a young lady who had once aspired to be a dancer, but a car accident left her bound to a wheelchair. She recounted her loss, but then visited the circus and became inspired by the personal tragedies each of the performers had to overcome on their respective journeys towards becoming artists.

The story collection process was much the same (focused on the theme of personal discovery). The process once again spanned two weeks, and the depth of stories told increased with each session, as the group discovered stories that were personal and difficult to share. The process again established a familial bond between the performers.

Elnaz Namvar, an Iranian student within the cast, commented: “The Story-Circle helped a group of individuals who were strangers to one another create a bond based on empathy and understanding. (It) helped us feel like we were no longer strangers to one another and aided in creating a friendship amongst the cast members. Every person I met during the Cirkus Story-Circle was a new face to me and I was able to feel like I belonged and was part of a family... (Elnaz Namvar).”

Layan Abouchkaier from Syria, who was in the cast of both Hiraeth and Cirkus, added, “...a devised piece like Cirkus requires a good and a close relationship between all the participants, whether cast or crew members. Therefore, the circle helped me in becoming closer to everyone in this production and knowing them better (Layan Abouchkaier).”

The digression for this project came in the monologue development stage of the process. Each student-actor had to write their own story and fictionalize it to suit the life of their created circus character. There was truth in each developed story, but the pieces were separated enough from reality that one could not tell where truth and fiction met. The impact of the Story-Circle was still quite visceral. Layan commented, “...since we had to develop the story of the production and create a background for our characters, the circle inspired me to develop my character and her story (Layan Abouchkaier).”

The stories were also pared down to the smallest of images. Most inconsequential words were eliminated from the text, so that only prominent images remained. The following piece was developed by Houda Atassi, a Syrian student who was cast to play the Highwire artist. Stage directions were added during the rehearsal process:





Figure 3. Photograph by Zuzana Tassa

Highwire: Family, not a home. Never understood, never accepted. Never enough.

All do ballet moves to their spots. Amalie rolls forward. Dances with hands.

Highwire: One passion, inner peace, one dream: ballet. Parents, siblings, torture

Supporters, Nana, ballet teacher Albert. Bravery, self-expression, freedom.

Hope, self-belief, a paved path. A continuous dream. Present, strength.

Waiting, excited, ballet room. A phone call.

Everyone halts in ballet positions.

Highwire: Shaking, tears, teacher Albert is dead.

Everyone collapses to the ground.

Amalie: Car crash

Highwire: Murdered by friend. Actually dead.

Amalie rolls next to Highwire artist.

Highwire: Gone, weak again. Freedom lost.

(Cirkus)

The piece went on to explore how she found herself again in the circus, on the highwire, lead on her new path by the Ringmaster. The Ringmaster took on a very nurturing role in the production. She had her own story of personal tragedy to overcome, but then served as a beacon of hope for the various performers who crossed her path. She was imbued with magical powers, much like Hakawati in Hiraeth, but palpable to the other circus performers in her role as Ringmaster and magician.

The esoteric form of the monologues, as well as the choreographed dance elements, allowed this production to trend more towards extreme physical theatre. In staging the stories, many avant-garde theatre techniques were employed; the chord, the plague (another Living Theatre exercise), and movement hieroglyphs, among others.

Both Hiraeth and Cirkus also included a group poem that was written at the conclusion of the Story-Circle portion of the process. This poem, entitled *The Exquisite Corpse* by The Living Theatre, begins with one actor writing two lines based upon what he or she has experienced. The actor then

folds the first line over and passes the paper along to the next actor who writes two more lines. That person then folds all over except the last line, and this process continues until each actor, in turn, has contributed two lines to the writing process. Below is the poem developed for Cirkus, with stage directions added:

Actors each have three physical positions and move between them in slow-motion throughout.

Clown 1: Sea singing

Trapeze: Trees dancing

Clown 2: Long living

Lion Tamer: Final call, make amends

Ringmaster: Distracting rage subverts

Highwire: A guide home, love

Lion Tamer: Amid chaos searching for light

Clown 1: Soaring, exploring truth

Trapeze: Clouds of acceptance

Clown 2: A dark forest of loathing abandoned

Lion Tamer: Forest to house loneliness, forest of despair

Ringmaster: Looking up wondering, "Why aren't you there?"

Highwire: But you are here, you've always been

Ringmaster: Look around, you're everywhere

Clown 1: Every second, every minute, every hour

Trapeze: Longing for solitude

Clown 2: A moment, open eyes, new world

Lion Tamer: Full of peaceful hearts

Ringmaster: A girl, red lips, long black hair

Highwire: More than a beauty queen, an heir

Trapeze: Drenched with grace (Falling to the ground)

ALL: Head held high balancing tiara (Raising heads)

World was hers for taking (Rising fully)

Life was hers for taking (Moving into position for dance)

(Cirkus)



Figure 4. Photograph by Zuzana Tassa

Though this poem was not a monologue developed by a single actor through the Story-Circle process, it was inspired by the process itself and developed by the ensemble. It served to help unify the production's themes as it drew towards its conclusion, bringing the major ideas in the project to fruition.

At the conclusion of *Cirkus*, Elnaz Namvar added, "It was a truly beautiful and heart-felt production and I am proud to have been a part of *Cirkus*. Beautifully directed, spectacularly executed, and the energy between the cast members was exhilarating. Furthermore, the Story-Circles are (a) beneficial tool that allow cast members to break out of their comfort zone and familiarize themselves with one another. It is a necessity, especially for a devised piece such as *Cirkus* (Elnaz Namvar)."

Layan Abouchkaier added, "Knowing people and becoming closer to them takes time. However, the Story-Circle made this process much faster. It allowed me to find similarities between me and my fellow actors." She continued, "It also showed me that the way people look like doesn't necessarily reflect who they are, which was clear during the circle by showing our human side to each other (Layan Abouchkaier)."

*Cirkus* was presented at the American University of Sharjah in Fall 2018, then remounted for the AUS Second International Theatre Festival in February 2019.

### Conclusion

Finally, I was able to test out the Story-Circle process and production development in a spring 2019 workshop series at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, USA. Working primarily with graduate acting students, we spent one day exploring Story-Circles, one day developing the monologues, and a third day crafting a piece of theatre based upon the previous two days' work.

This three-day series allowed me to test the full process in a compacted time-frame. Even though I was working with highly skilled and advanced acting students, this intensive format allowed me to truly see the power and influence of the Story-Circle. In a shortened period, the profound impact of the exercise was tangible. The students bonded quickly and were able to create a quality piece of theatre based in truth and real-life experiences.

Recently, I utilized the Story-Circle to develop a new devised theatre piece with student actors, which explored Bedouin culture in the United Arab Emirates. The new devised piece played at the American University of Sharjah during the 2021-2022 academic year.

I will continue to return to the Story-Circle process, as it is a powerful tool, not only for developing new material, but for creating a cohesive ensemble. More specifically, however, it is a tool for

developing a sense of community and cohesiveness that could prove useful in many different educational, cultural, and occupational environments.

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