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## **FACULTY VOICE: PUTTING HISTORY ON STAGE**

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In November 2013, representatives from the Office of Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives met with members of the Department of Theatre and me to discuss what contribution we might be able to make to a new campus-wide initiative. The aim of their initiative, Project 60/50, was to spark conversations surrounding two watershed moments in national civil rights history.

My colleagues in the Department of Theatre and I decided that we would create a world premiere theatre piece as part of the initiative. We chose to narrow our attention to the history of human and civil rights at MSU. By limiting the focus of the piece we imagined that the play might be more easily researched. How wrong we were...



Jake Samson, Elijah El, and Melanie Wong have varying recollections of Gideon Smith's first game.

The main issue in researching the rich and varied stories of MSU was accessibility. Assistant professor Dan Smith served as dramaturg for the project and we began to collect information about MSU history that were, in a way, vetted and approved by MSU.

The information was collected from MSU websites and archives that celebrated these achievements but lacked the debate that must have been part of the decision-making process. This immediately impacted the slant of the piece. Would the play be only a celebration lionizing the progressive decisions of MSU?

At an early reading of the play for a public audience in March 2014, the answer was a resounding, "Yes." The play was comprised of small vignettes that explored milestones in MSU history.



Briana Bougard as Myrtle Craig

The play celebrated the first African American woman (Myrtle Craig) to graduate from MSU, the institution's inclusive policy to allow Japanese Americans to attend during World War II and MSU's successful program to assist migrant workers in receiving a college education.

The play in its earliest form lacked any examination of the struggles in MSU's evolution. The play and its research was a one-sided "conversation" that eschewed what went on behind closed doors nor included any public outrage that may have accompanied the creation of these enlightened policies. It became clear that institutional history, either MSU's or a nation's, too often forgets the strife and celebrates the outcome. It seemed to lack the necessary holistic examination of the issues evinced by Project 60/50.

Dr. Smith and I decided that rather than depend upon selected history we needed to seek alternate research methods in order to better present all sides of our history. During this phase of research we conducted interviews with representatives from MSU Safe Place, protestors against MSU's Native American policies and many more. We read firsthand accounts of the demonstration or "study in" of 1989 at the Administration Building. Dr. Smith scoured the MSU archives and transcripts of speeches of and meetings with former MSU President John Hannah to offer a richer perspective.

In this phase one interviewee would point us toward another person at the center of another MSU controversy. This chapter of the creation of "The 60/50 Theatre Project" revealed the missing layer of revolution absent from the original draft. This approach, while balanced, was entirely

historic in nature and lacked what seemed to be a major component of the conversation necessary for Project 60/50 — contemporary student voice.

A full conversation regarding civil and human rights at MSU needed to include a current chronicle of student opinion. During this phase of creating the play, actors auditioning for the show were asked to share their personal experiences regarding instances of exclusion or inclusion at MSU.

Many of their stories were shared in the final production. Their autobiographies offered contemporary counterpoint to the historical recreations. Interviews were also recorded with a larger cross-section of current MSU students to include a wider perspective.

Editing these personal stories to enhance the nearly completed script proved to be an issue. Despite the best intentions many of the stories were excluded, reduced, homogenized, shoehorned or adapted to make the most general of points. It is exactly that sort of compromise I imagine one must make when speaking for many.

In theatricalizing true events, interviews or student testimonials, I, as playwright, kept facing issues of misrepresentation. After speaking to MSU copyright librarian, Amy Blair this disclaimer was added to the script and program:

This show is called a fictional documentary (a term used by dramaturg, Daniel Smith) because it is based on facts augmented with much artistic license. These are for the most part real figures and real events but the dialogue, motivations and situations have been compressed, altered, convoluted for theatrical impact. Any misrepresentation is entirely unintentional.

It is this phrase “fictional documentary” that guided most of my writing for the play. While we all wanted to fairly represent MSU’s history and the student voice, it also was imperative that the show remain theatrically satisfying.

A cadre of collaborators joined Dr. Smith and me, including assistant professor Christina Traister as director, and designers, including undergraduates Megan Molloy (stage manager) and Ceejay Libut (scenery), and graduate students Rainie Jiang (costumes) and Hernando Claros (lighting and projections.)

The number of contributors added to “The 60/50 Theatre Project” kept growing and as the production expanded the original intent inevitably got diluted. What happens as any show nears opening is that the end product sometimes becomes more important than the show’s message. Things like lighting cues, costume changes and audience sightlines supplanted the conversations that were supposed to be created by Project 60/50.

Once opening night was upon us, the message of the piece was restored as audiences now shared in the experiment. For the first time in months, individuals who had no history with the creation of the production now had to divine the message of the play.

They were witness to a scene where an actor played the Rock on Farm Lane discussing the many uses of him for political purposes, a scene where three football fans recalled watching Gideon Smith (MSU’s first African American football player) with wildly different recollections of his first game or a silent scene where a woman professor must cover herself before exiting her classroom at the MSU Dubai campus.



Kara O'Connor as The Rock

To add to the audience's role of arbiter of inclusion and diversity, the actors were not cast to type. They played sexes, races and ethnicities different than their own allowing the audience to create their own interpretations of these theatrical "facts" about MSU. No matter how passionate the messengers, it is all left to audience perception.

As we approach Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2015, the conversation created by programming like "The 60/50 Theatre Project" seems an imperative. By dramatizing and examining past struggles and successes in our nation one can offer a more informed viewpoint to the current debates regarding civil and human rights that are so much a part of our daily life. And while all involved with the production gained a richer knowledge of MSU's role in human and civil rights, we also gained a broader perspective from which to debate issues of race and class which are so prevalent in the news.

For those involved with the Department of Theatre's theatrical contribution, Project 60/50 has expanded the conversation.