Ethical Relationality in Dance Rehearsal Spaces: A Case Study of *Mizu no Eki*

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Abstract

Performing arts are important to the cultural fabric, yet in North America, they tend to lack diversity and may reinforce social inequities through training and performance that is based on hegemonic cultural identities. In this paper, we explore an approach to creation and rehearsal that could be more inclusive to diverse perspectives and identities, such that performing arts can convey the complexities of multiple realities relevant to the North American context. We propose ethical relationality, a conscious consideration of relationships with the self, others, historical legacies, and social and physical environments, as an approach to the creation and rehearsal processes. The application of ethics to these processes has the potential to produce more relatable, pluralist, and ethical creation practices and performances, and promote responsible, responsive, and affective engagement with others. It requires a flexible, collaborative approach, with shared power and shared responsibility for each other and the engagement of all participants in the process and in the work created. Through a case study of a wordless theatrical dance performance, we give a concrete example of how an ethical relationality approach could facilitate open and courageous creative processes, acknowledging the various factors of oppression and omission to which the performing arts are subject.

Photo of Léa Fournier in Mizu no Eki, directed by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, December 2022. Photo by Brooklyn Melnyk.

Performing arts were historically used to create or reinforce hierarchies in social systems (Levine, 1990), making Eurocentric arts, such as ballet, "superior" to arts of non-European origin. This has carried into present-day Canadian performing arts, which tend to amplify White, heteronormative, neuronormative, and able-bodied perspectives, and minimize or omit others. These power dynamics disproportionately portray the perspectives of dominant populations, thereby reinforcing systemic injustices in Canadian society.

In training and performance situations, hegemonic cultural identities can reinforce social inequities, either intentionally or accidentally, by perpetuating and sometimes exaggerating, harmful stereotypes or by simply ignoring alternatives to social norms (Spatz, 2015). For example, the aesthetics and technique of ballet are often highly valued and considered to be foundational for all styles of dance and many mainstream movement-based performing arts, thereby positioning Whiteness (as well as heteronormative, neuronormative, and able-bodied perspectives) at the center of practice (Schupp, 2020). While more performing arts organizations are making (or are desiring to make) efforts to increase diversity, integration of multicultural or multiethnic styles is often done in a somewhat superficial or performative manner. Artists may learn some basic technique and gain an appreciation for the style, but rarely do they learn to use their new knowledge to

question or challenge the Western norms in performing arts spaces (Risner & Stinson, 2010). Furthermore, when change is made without a parallel reflection on the structural issues that have caused the exclusion, the changes tend to be short-lived and often cause harm to the "included" persons.

As White able-bodied folks with considerable privilege, who occupy positions with some power in the performing arts industry, we have come to recognize the need for a reflective approach to guide us in our work and practice, one that might also serve as a template for ethical approaches to performing arts practice. Peter is a cisgender heterosexual male theater director and actor who has been working in intercultural contexts for over 30 years within his former role as co-founder of the Modern Times Stage Company and current position as coordinator of the Postmarginal project. As a researcher and teacher, Peter is curious about a plurality of influences on the ethical dynamics of theater rehearsal and training practices. His research into the ethical relationality of rehearsal practice have led him to propose a tool called an Ethical Tapestry, which will be discussed here in a case study of a rehearsal/training process at a post-secondary theater training institution. Melanie is a female researcher who studies performance and social innovation in performing arts and is interested in inclusive, ethical approaches to research creation and arts-based knowledge-transfer projects. Over the last five or so years, she has begun to deconstruct her education and experience, to enable more inclusive training, research and creation environments.

We believe that one of the many possible ways to make performing arts more inclusive lies in the approach we take to relate to ourselves, others, our environment, and of course, the art we create or interpret. We call this relationality. In performing arts, there are a number of normative values that have been integrated into standard training and are taken for granted as proper technique or the one impactful way to tell a story. When we can move away from this binary viewpoint to embrace the multiple possibilities for creation and performance, the norms of performing arts can shift. The creation and rehearsal process is

an interesting phase to consider, as it links artistic practice with the goal of audience engagement or consumption. While creation and rehearsal processes are generally conducted in hierarchical systems, which tend to perpetuate normative cultural identities (Vandevender, 2020), there is a potential for them to be spaces where hegemonic narratives are challenged, multiple perspectives are discussed and integrated, and artistic outcomes that shift the perceptions of both the artists and the audience can emerge (Leupin, 2018). However, relationality in creation and rehearsal spaces must be intentionally cultivated and reflected upon in an ethical manner to support meaningful, respectful conversations of different perspectives and experiences, the development of new techniques to express these differences, and their integration into performance. As performing arts organizations with primarily White leadership aim to invite more diverse participation, it is particularly important that intentional shifts are made in the internal culture to support meaningful engagement of all participants.

In this paper, we consider what it means to ethically relate to the self, others, and the environment and social systems in which we are embedded. For the purposes of this discussion, we define ethics as an ongoing practice of reflective consciousness of the self, context, and interpersonal relationships that enables a collective imagination and a responsibility for ourselves, our environment, and for others (Bannon, 2018). We consider how ethical relations apply to the Canadian performing arts context and how ethical relationality (Donald, 2012) could be used in dance creation and rehearsal spaces to enable equitable co-creation by inviting and relating with diverse beliefs, perspectives, knowledge, and experiences. As a landscape for this theoretical discussion, we offer a case study of a small studio production of *Mizu no Eki*, a wordless, slow-tempo dance-theater piece by Ōta Shōgo, that took place at Concordia University in Montreal in the fall of 2022. From this process, led by Peter, emerged the Ethical Tapestry, a tool that offers an approach to identifying and navigating relationships between human and nonhuman elements in creation and rehearsal practices. In our attempt to shed light on the question of

ethics and rehearsal practice, we do not position ourselves as leaders in equity, diversity, and inclusion, nor do we suggest that we have all of the answers. We simply intend to share some of our current understandings, reflections, and practices, which have emerged from our commitments to decentering our practices. We hope this will generate discussion, catalyze new connections, and perhaps prompt self-reflection in others interested in ethical relationality in performing arts.

Photo of Ian Crane in Mizu no Eki, directed by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, December 2022. Photo by Brooklyn Melnyk.

What Is Ethical Relationality?

Simply stated, ethical relationality is a conscientious approach applied to relationships. To our knowledge, scholar Dwayne Donald, a descendent of the amiskwaciwiyiniwak (Beaver Hills people) and the Papaschase Cree, first introduced it as an approach to research and writing. He

posited that this approach would more adequately demonstrate the conflictual reality of Indigenous and Canadian relations, without needing to resolve the conflict by describing a hybridized or assimilated account of the complex collective experience. He writes, "This concept of relationality instantiates an ethical imperative to acknowledge and honor the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people in the world are tied together" (Donald, 2012, 536). Relationality is strongly affected by power dynamics and patriarchal, heteronormative norms that require conscious, deliberate critical thinking to navigate (Wildcat & Voth, 2023), with consideration for systemic injustices at multiple ecological levels. This is especially important when we are creating with the intention of bringing forward new perspectives that we hope will shift the dominant conversations in our spaces. To do so, ethical relationality must go beyond the celebration of the similarities of our shared humanity and instead requires that we acknowledge and honor our different histories, cultures, and social experiences (Donald, 2012). It asks us to become uncomfortable with our positions and privileges, and to hold the tensions of our differing realities without trying to assimilate them into one reality or to solve a problem. Ethical relationality requires negotiation of differences in moral standpoints, knowledge, beliefs, and experience.

Ethical relationality is rooted in Indigenous *Métissage*, which is a counternarrative to colonialism that demonstrates how relationality and difference can be productively held in tension as we engage with ambiguity and difficulty (Donald, 2012). In order to shift from an individualistic perspective of imagination and identity or to dissuade ourselves from assimilating multiple experiences into a single perspective, Indigenous *Métissage* uses the metaphor of braiding to conceptualize how these varying perspectives can be constructed into a single model (Donald, 2012). The braid will continue to morph as new tools, methods, and techniques are introduced and emerging outcomes are integrated; however, the individual "strands" still remain. Importantly, in braiding, no one strand becomes more legitimate or dominant than other strands

(metaphorically, perspectives); rather, all strands have an equal value in the emerging and evolving process. Donald's work has inspired us to incorporate the concept of *Etuaptmumk* ("Two-eyed seeing"; Riley et al., 2023), to generate a relational process connecting Indigenous and Western perspectives within the performing arts.

Ethical Relationality in Performing Arts

Creative industries, including performing arts, play an important cultural role in representing and reflecting social norms (Glǎveanu, 2021; O'Brien & Arnold, 2022; Rowe & Kaufman, 2023). Performing arts can perpetuate stereotypical norms (Spatz, 2015), but also can offer an alternative perspective and promote social change (Rowe & Kaufman, 2023; Vandevender, 2020). In North American culture, the current reflection is heavily White, heteronormative, and able-bodied (Schupp, 2020), and does not adequately reflect the rich multi-identity reality. While heterarchical dramaturgies[1] exist as alternatives to the Aristotelian model, and in some cultures are prevalent, the mainstream Canadian performing arts industry (i.e., theater, dance, performance, music) has retained, for the most part, a hierarchical, linear model of creation, storytelling, and performance (Trencsényi, 2021). It generally looks like this: a power structure where idea generation and decision making is restricted to a small leadership (e.g., director, producer, casting); a linear plot that moves from complication through change to solution, generally from a single perspective (e.g., stories of the hero's quest in various forms); and a cast that may have little creative or perspectival contribution (e.g., artists who are given direction and do not have the opportunity for input). This tends to favor closed and singular narratives of conquest and leaves little room for the integration of multiple viewpoints. While this type of performance is

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1. Heterarchical management structures are flexible and distribute authority and agency to multiple levels, often through circular pathways, such that there is not one central dominating power. As dramaturgies, they often include multiple perspectives or a circular worldview, nonlinear, sometimes conflictless storylines, and are developed in more collaborative networks (Trencsényi, 2021).

valid and valuable, there is also an opportunity to create performances that offer alternative narratives and perspectives, which could more appropriately reflect the experiences of diverse artists and audiences, and become, as a result, more ethical in their outlook.

Similarly, ethical relationality as an approach to creation and rehearsal has the potential to produce more relatable, pluralist, and ethical creation practices and performances. Even if the training curriculums remain rooted in oppressive foundations, the application of ethics to the creation and rehearsal processes can prompt choreographers, artists, directors, and others to consider the potential impact of the work created, and promote responsible, responsive, and affective engagement with others (Bannon, 2018; Vandevender, 2020). This requires a flexible, collaborative approach with shared power (Leupin, 2018; Vandevender, 2020) and shared responsibility for each other, the engagement of all participants in the process and the work created (Bannon, 2018; Leupin, 2018). Such an approach could facilitate open and courageous creative processes, acknowledging the various factors of oppression and omission to which the performing arts are subject.

Case Study: A Studio Production of *Mizu no Eki*

Photo of Armias Azariya and Aiden Cottreau in Mizu no Eki, directed by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, December 2022. Photo by Brooklyn Melnyk.

In the fall of 2022, Peter applied an ethical relationality approach to the creation and rehearsal process with a cohort of seven third- and fourth-year students at the Department of Theatre of Concordia University. As instructor of the class and director-facilitator of the project, Peter led a studio production of Ōta Shōgo's *Mizu no Eki* (1982), which was combined with a parallel course that looked at the ethical relationality of the students' rehearsal practice, to see how Dwayne Donald's concept of presencing social, cultural, and historical factors might unfold in practice. The ethical relationality approach was supported by a dynamic digital multimedia document, called an Ethical Tapestry, that revealed at specific points in time what behaviors and contexts were conducting the intersubjective relationships in a rehearsal practice.

Photo of Julia Pye in Mizu no Eki, directed by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, December 2022. Photo by Brooklyn Melnyk.

Mizu no Eki, which translates from Japanese as *The Water Station*, is a wordless dance-theater piece that shares experiences of people on their journey to a broken water tap. There is no dialogue, an emptiness in space, and the movement unfolds in a snail-paced tempo. Some of the challenges of performing this piece are: (1) the deeply somatic nature of the performance for theater students; (2) the challenge of interpreting a Japanese artwork; and (3) creating an equitable and inclusive creation and rehearsal with a cast diverse

in cultural background, neurological characteristics, and abilities, within an institutional hierarchy (a university course). These three challenges represent relationality on various levels: (1) relation to self and the multiplicity of selves that comprise human beings; (2) relation to a work of a different culture; and (3) relation with each other, the rehearsal space-time, the institutional systems, as well as external factors affecting the participants' overall well-being.

The digital multimedia tool, the Ethical Tapestry, contained text, photos, video, and sound that represented a temporal portrait of the interpersonal and interenvironmental relationships present in the rehearsal practice. It served as a means of communication that could be anonymous should anyone feel unwilling to step forward to speak. At the onset, participants were asked to write all the influences that could affect power and agency in the group to embrace Dwayne Donald's notion of identifying the historical, social, and cultural context of the work. This document, called Contributing Influences, was intended as a means to become aware of the various identities, contexts, artifacts (nonhuman artistic and production resources), and the ethical relations that existed between them within the space. Participants were given nine prompts:

1) *Current events*, to understand how events happening throughout the world may affect individuals' relationships, capacities, or availabilities
2) *Positionality*, to consider how individuals' ethnocultural, gender, and neurological characteristics may interrelate with others
3) *Dramatic material*, to reflect on how the content of the performance piece could shift relations within the group
4) *Space-time*, to consider how the rehearsal space and time might impact individual routines and, thus, relationships
5) *Unspoken*, to give the opportunity to acknowledge and disclose what might affect relationality that others may not be aware of (including insecurities, judgments, traumas, etc.)
6) *Leadership styles*, to consider how to share power and agency in rehearsal

7) *Beliefs*, to bring awareness to how religious or political beliefs could affect the perspectives of others or the dramatic material

8) *Institutional*, to recognize how participating in a project within the structure of an institution (a university) could affect working relationships

9) *Any other considerations or concerns* that arise during the process, which could impact relationality
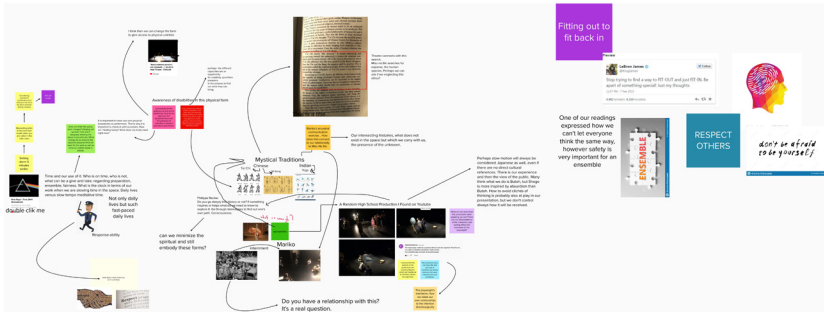
Screenshot of Ethical Tapestry from the rehearsal process of Mizu no Eki, led by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, Fall 2022.

The Ethical Tapestry was updated throughout the creation and rehearsal process, and changed over time to reflect real-time emotions and experiences, which evolved with the lived experience of the participants.

While the Ethical Tapestry was the main tool for expressing and managing ethics in the space, several practices were integrated into rehearsal to support relations needed for the performance. The wordless dance-theater piece required the artists to have a deep relationship with their own bodies. To support this relationship, the artists engaged in somatic movement practices including Hatha yoga, Qigong, and Tai Chi. The artists examined their relationship to those cultural practices. At one point in the process, dancer choreographer Laurie-Anne Langis was brought in to help the students link their personal stories to the silent, movement-based narratives of the characters.

A co-creative approach was used to encourage students to engage in the process. Although the structure was hierarchical, with Peter serving as director and course evaluator, agency and power was shared asymmetrically at different times and steps in the rehearsal process, integrating heterarchical components into the structure. Students were encouraged to voice their ideas and opinions, to negotiate, and to accept the possibility of failure. They were given freedom to develop their own characters and have significant input in the development and production of the show.

The Ethical Tapestry supported many reflexive moments in the rehearsal process of *Mizu no Eki*. As a creative team, none of whom had a prior background in Japanese theater, interpreting a Japanese work, there was initial focus on how to approach Japanese cultural artifacts in a respectful and meaningful way. Although Ōta's own artistic intent was to explore universalist and "species"-specific theater work (Boyd, 2006), and he used Western cultural influences in his work, the group examined its relationship of power to Japanese society and culture. Peter described some of Canada's racist history with its Japanese-Canadian population, especially the internment camps of the Second World War. The students and Peter also researched other productions of the play, rejecting those that emphasized the exotic "Asian-ness" of the work and opting for costumes, sets, and other artifacts reflective of themselves and their own cultural histories. This process was supported by a guest artist, Mariko Tanabe, who led the group through somatic and ancestral healing exercises from her own practice as a choreographer-dancer of Japanese descent.

From another perspective of potential appropriation, one of the students posted in the Tapestry their discomfort with the cultural contexts of the psychophysical training techniques that Peter was deploying in the work. As a result, Peter dropped one of the preparatory exercises from the training roster, considering himself and the group insufficiently versed in its cultural history to incorporate it into their practice.

Given his position as instructor of the class and director-facilitator of the production, Peter was the most significant factor of power

during the process. He challenged this in several ways, for example, by opening conversations on the group's relationship to time, including punctuality of rehearsal start times, and handing in assignments and production material. The process helped to push back certain institutional norms of rehearsal start times and production deadlines with respect to the needs of the group and offer compromises when professional rigor became oppressive.

According to feedback from the students about the work following the course, the final product appeared to be a production that the students were proud of and proud to be a part of. They stated their interest and enthusiasm for the ethical relationality approach (Farbridge, 2022). One student commented on the process of ethical relationality this way:

> There wasn't one thing I think that we took for granted . . . every single one of those things was up for discussion. That spirit of adapting the rehearsal room and adapting those conventions to each individual project, and to the people involved in each individual project, whatever that evolves to be, is, to me, the thing that carries over well (Farbridge, 2022).

Excerpt of music by Ian Crane, from Mizu no Eki, directed by Peter Farbridge, Concordia University Department of Theatre, December 2022. For the full audio, visit the online journal at https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations.

Regardless of its possible initial success in this case study, the Ethical Tapestry is neither a panacea for ethical behavior nor a replacement for transparent and honest face-to-face dialogue. For example, at the end of the rehearsal process, during the creation of the production's program, a dispute emerged about the billing of the students that required a tense discussion about the nature of roles in the production. In the development of the house program, Peter had changed the title of the role of a student whose creative responsibilities had increased over the course of the production process. This caused anger in other members of the group, who questioned the departure from

a collective stance on the creative development of the production. A meeting was held in which the group looked at the steps to this decision and questioned the justification of the change of title. It was an uncomfortable conversation, in which Peter apologized for the top-down nature of the decision, and the student in question spoke to their agreement with the appropriateness of their change in title. In the end, a collective decision was made to maintain the student's new billing in the program. This was perhaps an example of a significant contribution of the Tapestry as a mediator of interpersonal relationships in the rehearsal process. By actively thinking on and challenging the ethical stance of the rehearsal practice, the group established a vocabulary for such thinking and for talking about ethics, which Vandervender suggests can train "artists who are both prepared and committed to working for justice" (2020, 98). It is also reminiscent of what Rahel Leupin documents as Gintersdorfer/Klassen's practice of "response-ability," in which all members of a group can take part in negotiating the ethics of the process so as "not to deny, but to attend to power imbalances" (2018, 513).

The compassionate resolution of the dispute about billing within the creative team of *Mizu no Eki,* was perhaps a testament to the maturity of the participants but also enabled by centering ethical concerns throughout the process through the Ethical Tapestry. It required mental and emotional capacity from the group to face certain troubling realities head on and to imagine a solution to the conflict. The Ethical Tapestry could be considered, therefore, as a kind of canvas on which to "presence" future possibilities (Scharmer, 2007) of ethical relationships—to find generative solutions to ethical quandaries that are not solely regulated by institutional rules and language—which can be the wet blankets of a creative process. The purpose of the Tapestry was not to root out and destroy Eurocentric perspectives but rather to allow a specific group of artists involved in a specific practice, in a specific time and place, the opportunity to collectively determine their ethical relationships to each other and the artifacts of their work.

Looking Ahead

It is certain that there will never be a conclusion when addressing ethical relationships in any system. Given that, we briefly summarize and look ahead—with a sense of humility to the scope of the problem—to how we can continue to practice ethical relationality and how this could impact the performing arts sector. The crux, perhaps, is that ethical relationality shares the agency in the room and instantiates a new kind of communication system between participants. This could unfold in several ways, one of which is the Ethical Tapestry, which can be adapted to seek a universal digital design, to accommodate access needs, or could be implemented in a nondigital format. Importantly, the tool itself is not sufficient to *cause* ethical relationality, which occurs through conscious practice rather than completing a predetermined set of actions. In the case study presented above, several strategies were intentionally integrated to facilitate relational communication, and the director/facilitator was prepared and willing to use an ethical relationality approach. This meant that the director was transparent in his decision making and open to discussion and negotiation, infusing the institutional hierarchy with heterarchical elements, to share agency throughout the process. Here, we again emphasize that ethical relationality is not an outcome to arrive at but a process through which to approach situations in which the intention is to be inclusive beyond the limits of current social norms.

Dwayne Donald's Indigenous *Métissage* aligns well with the Possible (Glăveanu, 2021), a sociocultural theory based in possibility studies that we believe could support ethical relationality in performing arts creation. Possibility studies is an emerging academic field "dedicated to the study of [the] shift of focus from being to becoming, from what is to what could be, from deterministic accounts of the world to agentic, generative, and open-ended understandings" (Glăveanu, 2023, 3). The alignment of possibility studies with ethical relationality is in the openness to humans and the realities they exist in being in flux, as they are infused with new or differing perspectives (Bannon, 2018; Donald,

2012; Glăveanu, 2021, 2023). At the core of the Possible is the necessity of difference for new possibilities to emerge (Glăveanu 2021, 2023), similar to both Indigenous *Métissage* and Indigenous Relationality (Donald, 2012; Wildcat & Voth, 2023). With multiple perspectives, the goal is not necessarily to find common ground, but perhaps to find or create new ground as alternative perspectives emerge (Bannon, 2018). This act of creation is, of course, applicable to the performing arts context where directors, creators, collectives, among others, can choose to continue to reinterpret stories of dominant culture and perspectives, or to combine perspectives and create new stories. This braiding and holding of multiple perspectives has the potential to create more inclusive performing arts spaces that honor and celebrate differences that deviate from social norms.

Ethical relationality is a valuable approach in the performing arts, which is in and of itself a form of relationality. Performing arts connect people to a deeper understanding of themselves, others, and situations (Glăveanu, 2021; Rowe & Kaufman, 2023). As a representation of culture, they can reinforce social norms (Spatz, 2015) or reduce biases (García-Arch et al., 2021), and suggest new possibilities (Rowe & Kaufman, 2023). For those artists and companies aiming for socially responsible performance, representation and equity should be prioritized and intentionally sought. Like Bishop's (1990) "Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" analogy for books, performing arts, too, can act as a mirror of oneself, a window to glimpse into another's experience, or a sliding glass door to walk through and become a part of the scene presented. Inclusion and integration of multiple perspectives in the creation of art can allow a more diverse population to see themselves reflected in it and thus valued in society. An ethical relationality approach can be useful to mitigate appropriation or unintentional harm by including pluralistic perspectives and remaining open to discussion. It can allow people to better understand and empathize with the experiences of others and, ideally, to encourage them to engage in a way that can bring about positive change.

We live in a complex world that is undergoing continual change, and we need to intentionally navigate our relations within it, which are also continually shifting. Performing arts uniquely provide an experience of new perspectives in an embodied and immersive way (Glăveanu, 2021). An ethical relationality approach grounded in Indigenous *Métissage* (Donald, 2012) is one of many ways that we can engage in our relationships with the people and things we encounter in order to ethically create. With performing arts, we can share lived experiences to deepen our understanding from multiple perspectives, and we can also imagine and create new worlds that allow artists and audiences to experience the possibilities of an inclusive and equitable society.

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