

Letting the Light In: Exposing Society's Monsters in *Conscious Voices*

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Introduction:

Between the ending of the Annie Russell Theatre's 88th season, named the "season of women," (a celebration of female playwrights and composers) and her 89th season, celebrating Pulitzer Prize winning works from the last 89 years, *Conscious Voices* by Sonia Pasqual debuted in the space between seasons. The production marked a historic first: the first production of a play by a Black author on the Annie Russell Theatre stage. As a devised work, *Conscious Voices* explores via methods of ethnodrama and psychodrama the different voices that are typically not seen on stage, the monsters of deviation from the white, American norm. The devising process of the piece allowed actors to open the discursive milieu around the perceptions of identities, and dragged the monsters of hatred out into the light where they can be assessed. Devisers, then actors, and finally the audience encounter their experiences of fat phobia, colorism, and racism by thrusting their own deviance into the light. J. J Cohen notes in *Monster Theory* that these are the monsters that seem to always escape but leave a path of destruction in their wake. By conjuring their surrogates via spoken text, painting, animation, and dance, in *Conscious Voices* the unconscious mind dwells in a cave peopled with monstrous shadows, the voices of contemporary American culture doubling as they rebound against the walls leaving the performing subjects unsure of where their role as "the fat girl," or the "Black man" begins or ends. *Conscious Voices* calls the performers to push the monsters that haunt them of ableism, racism, and others into the light to become more aware of themselves and their own identities. As the dramatic surrogate of the college's "legitimate theatre"—performing in the margin of the "real season" of the Annie Russell Theatre—*Conscious Voices* like many acts of surrogation exceeded expectations, creating a surplus of significations demanding further conversation: about representation and casting in educational theatre, about suitable bodies and suitable voices on historic stages and in positions of authority in academic theatre (Roach 2). The work's creator, producer, designers, and performers as "candidates for surrogation"—junior faculty, recent graduates, local performers, and students—accepted the meager performance space between seasons, but they refuse to remain in that space. The monsters conjured by *Conscious Voices*, will not go back into the cave, and the work will continue—first in this forum, and in ongoing repetitions of its first revenance via publication, documentary film, and revival.

The Devising Process, and What Followed

Conscious Voices was first conceived as creator Sonia Pasqual's master's thesis. She wanted to challenge both American society and its theatre, writing in the introduction to the work that "the virtual world forced humanity to see the injustices from another lens where some were not able to turn their heads away anymore" (Pasqual 45) Pasqual said about the devising process that it

...began with the ensemble, a consultant and myself from...September 29 to December 15, 2020 in virtual sessions...Always at the center Plato's cave where ignorance versus knowledge or the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature set the scene from where we all begun.
(Pasqual 46)

For many months, the ensemble worked with each other and with Pasqual to face their own ignorance as well as the hatred and fear around them and their identities. *Conscious Voices* as a devised work seeks to encapsulate the ever-changing world of its creators. This play, like many others that were written in the past year, was crafted through a virtual medium. Unlike scripted work, Pasqual conducted the devising work on regular sessions over Zoom, working with devisers individually and as a group.

Pasqual's devising framework included four stages. In each stage, the prisoner of the cave must unshackle themselves from the cave of ignorance via a four-fold process: physically, mentally, emotionally and finally, spiritually. Each deviser begins in "the Cave," a symbolic space drawing on elements of Plato's allegory of the cave, but combined with Pasqual's understanding of psychodrama, devised theatre, and theatre for social change. The cave is a part of the unconsciousness, the home of ignorance and fear. The physical body is the first to leave the cave, leaving the shelter of the predetermined and safe images that the prisoners in the cave are used to. After the prisoner has allowed the physical body to leave the cave, they work through the myriad images, narratives, and accusations that had bombarded them while mired in unconsciousness, constituting the mental work of unshackling oneself from ignorance. The emotional body follows. This encompasses the senses, emotions and reactions to the world around them. Finally, the spiritual body is the last to leave the cave. This is the final stage where unconscious becomes truly conscious, aware of one's own body and actions in a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual sense. Some devisers' explorations' concluded with prayers, while others found solace in spiritual connection with nature, or in the act of forgiveness. By working the devisers through this pyramid framework, Pasqual wove her guiding presence as the thread between all of the different pieces. Over the course of a year's devising, researching, writing, dramaturgical workshopping, and rehearsal, Pasqual concluded that her place in the performance was to be the voice of the cave itself—a

womb from which the different voices would finding their own path out of the darkness and into the light of understanding.

This psycho dramatic process necessitated that each deviser conjure and embody their own monsters in order to drag them out into the light of performance. The stage itself became an extension of Pasqual's goal: to put before fellow humans the injustices and discriminations from another lens in such a way that would not able to turn their heads away anymore. Fat Phobia breaks apart her process with the voices from her childhood that had oversexualized her growing body, making us confront our own fears of the monstrous feminine and witness the shame we place on female children:

VOICEOVER: *"Don't sit on his lap! It doesn't matter who he is, girls don't sit on boys laps!" Why you got your stomach hanging over your pants like that" I'm soooooooooooooo jealous of your lips" "Gyrating bodies." "big JLo booty." "I want to wear thongs with my lowriders and a low cut shirt." "Let them see your body. But never your stomach, belly, gut, it's much too fat." (Conscious Voices 7)*

Blackness, too, makes the monster of racism personal, present, immediate by bringing the audience to a work barbecue in 2020, where an uncomfortable conversation demands that he speak for "Black people" about the recent riots.

BLACKNESS: But what hurts me the most is when they said I don't act threatening. What I heard was, I don't act Black! I've never felt so unsafe. That means that the only reason I get to run through Beth's neighborhood is because, I act a way that they accept, I act the way that they appreciate and if I didn't and something bad happened, I would have it coming too. And who's to say that if I didn't act like that and something bad happened, they wouldn't say the exact same thing.

(Pause) I always thought this, just not acting black meant that I get to be not boxed in like that. But even if I don't fit that description, I still have to suffer from it. (*Conscious Voices* 18-19)

To treat the monsters of our shared society, the devising process itself functioned as an exorcism of the monsters, thrusting the grotesque into the light.

Though manifestations of monsters have roots in geographic, political and religious connotations, the devisers rooted their work within the monsters of American society (Dixon 436). Monsters are often used to characterize the "other;" yet in Pasqual's framework the deviser begins as the

“other”, and exorcises the monsters of “normalcy” throughout the devising process (Dixon 435). The original work of devisers created original short stories, poems, paintings, and dances that emerged from moving through the process the Pasqual created. These materials were then transformed into a script that further sought to physicalize what Gerard Schneider calls the “monstrous quasi-objects” that have traumatized each of the unique individuals. The stage is the phenomenologically *most* adequate place to physically manifest what Schneider calls the “subjective traumatic experience” in order to conceptualize the traumas of racism, colorism, sexism, transphobia, and body shaming (1185). The performers were not the only ones illuminating the script in the process of creating *Conscious Voices*. The dramaturgical team, too, worked on finding their own voices in the process of working on the script. Calling on past devised work, the dramaturgs worked to shape the devisers material into a script, knowing that several of the pieces would not be voiced by their original creators. In their own way, they too ushered *Conscious Voices* from the cave into light. It was through their structural, and analytical suggestions that the script found its shape in performance.

The Performance

How do you stage the non-traditional within the traditional? The director of the production, Ghina Fawaz, worked within the confines of the space available to the production. The Annie Russell Theater is a traditional proscenium theater, which inherently works against the avant-garde style of devised theater. However, Fawaz worked to make audience members feel the stories that poured from the players on stage. Each performer sat in a chair on stage for the entirety of the show, only leaving after they had shared their story. In terms of the staging, each actor came to the very front of the apron and talked directly to their audience. This helped to maintain the connection between audience and performer, which is an often blurred line within devised theater. Animation designer, Ghina Fawaz, created a common visual vocabulary to link the individual pieces. .

I ended up liking this concept of using orbs as the voice, just to kind of make it a bit more relatable, having them move in their plane. And that is so simple, but it conveys the message that's about to happen...I think it's going to be very compelling for the audience to watch... It's taking this complex idea, right? The six complex experiences and abstracting it enough where an audience member who cannot relate or has not experienced what the actor has, can watch the animation and understand the feeling. (Ghina Fawaz, 2021)

Though many of the original devisers used the spoken word in their pieces, others chose to use dance to share their experiences to the audience. Movement is something that can be understood cross-culturally, which makes it useful for devisers. Franky Saveedra, the voice of nonbinary identity, used his dance to explore what words could not. He explains further, saying:

The piece itself unwrapped a lot of different situations that I've never spoken about publicly. And I'm displaying that through my dance, which is also in a way it ended up itself liberating, but it's also scary because I've never, because I've never taken it as, as one thing when certain events did happen, but now I'm incorporating that into my piece.

The performance milieu of *Conscious Voices* cannot be separated from the turmoil and trauma of the year 2020, the cultural and political empty space--the cave--filled with flickering images of painful murder, burning cities, racial trauma, and racist backlash. What pasqual captured via her four-fold devising process was the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual labor of a collective coming-to-consciousness. In *Monster Theory*, J.J. Cohen situates the monster in the birth act, "The monstrous is born...as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment--of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence" (Cohen 4). Devisers dove deep into the not-yet verbal subconscious via the devising process that activated the principles of psychodrama a la Augusto Boal, pulling into the stage lighting all of the "characters" that fill our cultural moment, the "neurotics, psychotics, melancholics," whose voices form the "pressure-cooker" of the person (*Rainbow of Desire* 36-37). "Persons" formed in a society filled with cops-in-the-head and cops on peoples' necks require aid to represent to themselves the experiences that Gerhard Schneider calls the monstrous "traumatic quasi-object" that overwhelms the subject with an excess of stimuli that "actively destroys the representational work of construing experience and linking it with other parts of the subject's inner world" (1187). The monsters of oppression and racism form the centrifugal force that pulls us back into the cave. The 'monstrousness' of Schneider's "traumatic Experience" leads to the subject no longer being "capable of holding together the protective skin of the meaning he or she is living. The skin begins tearing or dissolving because the subject is no longer able to withstand the tensions caused by the incomprehensibility of the void" (1187). Subjects in *Conscious Voices* draw slurs on their skin, tear at their skin, feel their skin as the hyper-presence of monstrous excess of pigment, as the absence of social approval, but then process through their trauma to a place of loving "this skin that I am in." This traumatic excess poured forth not only in the voices' memories of past traumas and prejudices but also in dance that could not be contained, paint filling the canvas, news images of contemporary violence, and a buffalo drum calling the performers to the work of making a new beginning.

The Reception of *Conscious Voices*

The playwright, Sonia Pasqual is the first Black Playwright to ever have her work produced on the Annie Russell Theatre stage. While still following COVID-19 protocols and with audiences still hesitant to enter indoor theatres in Florida, the recruitment of an audience included press releases, marketing material, a social media blitz, and an online ticketing system. One key element of the public outreach was the development of a cohesive marketing design across all of our media: from the poster to the website. Graphic designer Nicole Ponce remembers:

When creating the marketing material, I had the challenge of actualizing the essence of the show and its message through the artwork. The rendering process involved a few different ideas that were taken from the inspiration of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. This included the premise of individuals trying to escape the cave of ignorance to enter the real world which was symbolized through a flurry of color. The second design included a faceless head that was screaming, capturing the idea that these identities were finally taking the stage and would be able to speak their truths thus combatting their "Monsters."

Audiences at both performances were engaged, surprised, discomfited. Audible gasps, quiet sobs, and bits of laughter were heard throughout the duration of the production. Talkbacks following each performance revealed that the "rainbow coalition" of performers onstage achieved one of its goals: no matter the audience member, there would be one person on stage with whom any audience member could identify. The two audiences—the most diverse audiences seen in the theatre perhaps in its history—remained for honest and energetic talkbacks facilitated by the dramaturgs.

Conclusion: Bringing the Monsters into the Light

Once we begin to look at the conceptual products /products of conception produced by the devisers, the themes, images, and locales that they conjure through writing and performance illuminate an American landscape littered with traumatized children, unable to feel they have integrated successfully as adults in the social order. As they evoke the traumatizing quasi-object of racism and oppression, the devising process led them to then physicalize that journey through images of wombs, fetal positions, and traumatic separation from the mother in childbirth. Gerard Schneider claims that we process trauma primarily by returning to our primary trauma: that of the initial interruption of the fetal situation and the necessity to successfully transition to the Experience of the mother-as-object rather than mother-as-self.ⁱ Each deviser represented their own story as a narrative of aborted development, a process interrupted by the vicious voices of a society that seeks to annihilate the individual and replace them with the changeling child we all call "normal." The most extreme example of this common trope

was the piece written by a white female deviser, who left the production process, but gave permission for her piece to be performed by a surrogate performer. Her piece is a stream-of-conscious poem of a woman refusing to be “born” into a more aware state of consciousness.

WHITENESS: There are shadows here that I do not understand... Where are you, before? I long to feel you around me. I want to stay here for it is too scary in a world that is meant to be shared with others. Momma is mine and only mine right now in her womb....

Thanks for showing us through the shadow of our own ignorance—we might be illuminated... Until then, I return to the depths of the cave, where I rest my mind, my thoughts and let the world unfold into oblivion. (*Conscious Voices* 14)

Pasqual’s piece offers an alternative to this American landscape and the process by which we inflict trauma on each new generation. Instead of a monstrous motherhood that leaves the child unable to come into full being (symbolized in the work by the dying mother at the center of Whiteness’s monologue), Pasqual constructed an alternative womb: appropriating Plato’s cave as feminine creative and healing potential. Director Ghina Fawaz, too, sought healing via her staging—choosing to add one last “thread” to the show’s message: Blackness closes the show offering Whiteness a hand of friendship, inviting her to join him at a slam poetry event. She refuses, unable to leave the Cave. But the extended hand of friendship stands as a powerful witness to what the process and product of *Consciousness Voices* made manifest for one community in the wild years of 2020 and 2021.

Works Cited

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ⁱ “The destruction of a previous context of being (the equilibrium of the fetal situation) brought about by external forces is structurally parallel to a contingent later trauma, which consequently evokes the original traumatic nucleus. However, the qualitative difference must not be overlooked: unlike a subsequent trauma, that of birth is not just the destruction of a context of being, but also a kind of (catastrophic) change essential to growth, a kind of transformative transition” (Schneider 1188).