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"Debate: Millennials don't stand a chance" Devised, documentary and immersive theatre: The Story of EveryMillennial

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“Debate: Millennials Don’t Stand a Chance”

Devised, Documentary, and Immersive Theatre

The Story of EveryMillennial

A Project Presented to

The Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Visual and Performing Arts

James Madison University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of Bachelor of Arts

By Sean Richard Byrne

May 2015

Approved by the faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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Dedication:

To those who often find themselves lost or on the outside, those who don't perceive themselves as part of a group, those who often question where they belong. A community is where we exist. Where we are free to be ourselves, to explore and to be loved. The following year and a half of work is for you.

To my family, both blood and not, who have supported me every step of the way, even if reluctantly sometimes.

To those in the JMU School of Theatre and Dance who dared to come on this journey.

#Itllmeansomethingtosomebody

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I. Abstract:

This thesis aims to discover how *communitas* can be created through theatrical performances by blurring the line between audience and performer as well as performer and character. The topic of the Millennial generation is used as a thematic element in performance to emphasize the creation of community. A theatrical form will be introduced, called the “Living Biography:” a method of devising based on devising, documentary, and immersive theatre. This form will be shown as one possible option in creating *communitas* in a performance. While other forms of audience inclusion are frequently used, it will be argued that the “Living Biography” approach is also a strong mean to create a community. Work by The Civilians, Anne Deveare Smith and Tectonic Theatre Project will be referenced influencing the concept of this thesis as well as informing the production qualities. This thesis will also argue that creating community in and of the performers themselves also greatly serves and is necessary to create *communitas* in a performance. The devising process will be heavily referenced throughout the thesis and detailed so that an understanding of the process is clear to the readers. A definition of Millennials will be given along with interviews conducted and remarks from the thesis ensemble.

II. Introduction

Ensemble: a group of people or things that make up a complete unit (such as a musical group, a group of actors or dancers, or a set of clothes) (Merriam-Webster)

Communitas: denoting intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with rituals. In communitas, people stand together "outside" society, and society is strengthened by this. (Dictionary of Anthropology)

Theatre is unique in its relationship to the community it's in. Theatre is one of the few art forms that allow the artist to directly interact with an audience. My goal with this production was to find a way to work with the audience in building a sense of community; of communitas within the context of a theatrical production. Communitas is that feeling you get when you're in the moment of an experience – being together with everyone else and witnessing the event. According to the dictionary of anthropology it's the ability of people to stand together outside society while still feeling connected together. To me, if theatre can produce this effect, than this is what theatre should be pursuing.

My aim then, was to discover how exactly to achieve this feeling with the audience. At first the range was very broad; research covered a very large spectrum of immersive type theatres. Eventually, after pairing down the list, it was settled that the project would work to blend together a few different styles: devised, documentary and immersive theatre. Working within the parameters of these three would allow the audience to be fully immersed inside the production while engaged with the community around them.

But what I didn't expect was how much the ensemble themselves would work to build a community. Immediately into the start of the process, nine very distinct personalities entered into the process of building this piece. But working with these nine members showed that through a process a number of individuals can form a community. At the end of the project, I was surprised to see just how much of a family these nine other artists had become. It was at this point that I realized that, although the research and performance were still vitally important to me, it was really the process of creating community that drove this project. Without the process of building the ensemble, it is safe to say that the piece itself would not have existed, nor built the community to the extent that it did.

As a college student about to enter the 'real world' the college experience has been on my mind for a while. The college experience is built off of the idea of taking four years preparing young adults to be active members contributing beneficially to society. It's assumed to be this generation's job to continue to keep our world running, to keep everything in check and fit as a fiddle. And yet, some think that we're the exact opposite of this. Recent studies and articles have found that this current generation of up-and-coming 'world-keepers' is anything but ready to take over. Where does that leave us?

For the past three years or so, the Millennial generation (those who had reached or were reaching adulthood around the year 2000) has come under fire for our lifestyle. We've been called "entitled, coddled and narcissistic" (NPR) and "trophy kids" (*The Washington Post*); it's been said that we "complain . . . disrupt stuff" (*New York Times*). Joel Stein describes the "narcissistic millennial generation" as both the savior and ruin of the world's future. Vast arrays of claims have been laid at our door, a share of good and bad to

be sure, but mainly a question of identity. Every coming-of-age generation has their story: the flower children, the greasers, the teenyboppers, etc. and so we, the Millennials, also have ours. This was to be the anchor then, using the idea of devised, documentary, immersive theatre, the piece would try to create a piece that not only defined the Millennial generation but also invite the audience to experience that definition for themselves.

This paper will identify and explain the process of the entire piece: from research, to auditioning, devising the piece and applying the research, and the final presentation. It will cover the success and failures of *EveryMillennial* through the process and the presentation. The paper will also touch on how this piece differed from that research it was based off of and how it may continue to develop or affect a community.

III. Literature and Performance Review/ The Living Biography

In his book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal writes, "Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him. Brecht proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself...But the poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or the actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary he himself assumes the protagonic role" (Boal, 122). This project aims to once again build on what has been put forth before on the poetics of the spectator. Each step as Boal writes them encourages and moves the audience one step further in the immersion of theatre, thus creating a theatre where the oppressed have a voice and which can be used for social advancement.

But what happens when such theatre doesn't have the chance to work with those who are marginally oppressed? Surely these exercises and benefits of creating the spectator can be used in other means? This project then proposes another poetic, the poetics of community. By engaging the spectators in performance and allowing them to not only influence the performance itself but also the process gives them a heavier responsibility in the piece and larger voice in the project. "We understand what an audience is in this context and understand how we should behave as part of one, so that the activity that goes *beyond* this role feels different and is different to the activity we expect to see" (White, 4). Through the liberation of the audience from their traditional experience, it can be understood that "the rush they perceive from being present is the shedding of saturated identities forged through relations who are present and the assumption of identities from elsewhere" (Read,

124). Through performance, it allows the audience to gain a clearer sense of self – which can then be used as a stepping stone toward creating community, or the relationship of many selves to each other. Heidegger, an existential philosopher, believed that each person’s Being, their own self, came with the natural ability to understand the Other and to relate to it, thus expanding it’s own sense of Being (Cornwell).

The poetics of community should allow the spectators to delegate power to the actors in lieu of themselves while still holding power in the process. The spectator informs the creation of the piece and the power it holds in performance. It is the theatre makers responsibility to create a place for the spectator to share his voice and then re-share that story in lieu of the spectator when she no longer is able. In using this to inform a process and performance, it should allow the theatre makers to be as honest as possible – to create a piece of theatre that is not overly cathartic nor fictional and that allows a dialogue to naturally occur. In the end, it should aim to create and bolster the community by sharing stories of a spectator’s Being which in turn help define the Other, in this case another spectator’s Being. Both then, come together to help define and give a voice to the community as a whole – what I’ve termed The Living Biography.

Rather like the Civilians, Tectonic Theatre Project and Anne Deveare Smith, this project posits the best way to develop The Living Biography is to collect and present true stories from individuals within the same community. Because of this, “The texts, which are written during the devising process, bear echoes or traces of the source materials” (Gieseckam). This way, the audience is involved in the process from the start of creation. Verbatim theatre, or the practice of using exact words of another to inform the script, has a long history originating back to Pcsator, Brecht and Boal. All three were among the first to

use media stories, especially from newspapers, to influence their productions. Newspaper theatre was often used because it presented what the audience wanted and allowed the interaction between actor and spectator. It would take the stories of the day and add theatricality so as to better reach the audience with a message (Boal, 143). Verbatim theatre has enjoyed resurgence amongst today's younger audience because it appeals to and allows for a greater diversity of topics and stories (Anderson). It allows an audience to experience a truthful and real character; one audience member can actually empathize with (Gallager).

IV. Project Design/ The Process

Going into the creation of this, the desire was to create a project with a unique experience; one that the students of the School of Visual and Performing Arts as well as the James Madison University community had not seen before. In order to do this, it became important to establish a specific set of guidelines while still leaving enough room so that the devising process would not be hindered. It's important to leave enough elements of the product up to the group, to encourage "a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas" (Oddey, 1). This way of working helps encourage group trust and responsibility toward the piece, indeed, one of the greatest factors in creating a holistic piece, is that "the [players] daring and inventiveness with which they have set themselves" (Clark, 38). By establishing only basic parameters, it allows the group the openness to work toward the goals they find naturally. The guidelines were as follows:

1. There would be two performances, so as to allow time to adjust and discuss the product as the audience responded to it.
2. The cast would be eight members, comprised of one male and female from each grade level.
3. The piece should be approximately an hour in length.

To these, a personal manifest was also added: it was important that the process and ensemble reflect a community of trust and respect, so that a truly honest product could arise out of the process.

How this all was to culminate together though, was left open to the ensemble themselves. Auditions were open to all JMU students. Auditioners were asked to prepare a

one-minute, true, personal story that they were to present and then share with a partner. Person A, then, would present her story to the entire group and once everyone had done so, Person A would share her story with Person B, who then would do his best to present himself, honestly, as Person A presenting her story; and vice versa. After, the group worked to play a few theatre games developed by Augusto Boal: Defender: in which a person selects two people to play a bomb and a shield and must keep the shield in-between himself and the bomb; Complete the Image; in which two participants would create a basic set-up and then freeze, while a third person got up to replace one actor, adopt a different physical image and start something entirely new. They also had the chance to work together with a partner and mirror what the other person might be doing, exchange the leader role and then work to move together.

Once these activities had been completed, the entire group was split into two smaller groups for devising work. To keep it fair, four random requirements were chosen from eight options. For example, the group may have needed to create a piece using 'something round,' 'a group song,' 'an embarrassing moment,' and 'a line of famous text.' The group would then be given seven minutes to devise a one-minute scene and present it. Holding auditions this way not only introduced the auditionees to a rough style of the production but allowed them to work together and see where natural partnerships or leadership formed. From here, all that was left was to cast the play.

"It is the group, the company, that will be our test-bed. It follows then that the group must be a special group of people" (Clark, 6). Whereas Clark is completely right in saying that the group must be a special group of people and most research concerning devising agrees, what lacks is how then to form such a special group. After sitting through auditions,

nine ensemble members were cast instead of the eight traditionally sought after; these members represented a wide range of values both assumed to be millennial in nature and those that were exact opposites. So, in the end, it was clear that a very special group had been formed – but what was left unclear was how then to bring this group together, how to move the group from a collection of individuals to an ensemble. “The success of the group will ultimately be judged in the theatre, with an audience” (Clark, 38). If we were to take this idea as the first definition of achieving an ensemble, it seemed that the best way to guarantee *communitas* within the performance and audience, was to first ensure *communitas* within the ensemble.

Ultimately, this methodology didn’t appear until after the piece was over. Although the goal from the beginning was to develop a strong ensemble in order to achieve a strong production with an audience, it wasn’t until late into the devising process that it was realized the process itself of creating the ensemble was one of the keys to achieving community within a performance. An ensemble must be established if the product should mean anything to anyone else. It should be posited that a strong and honest ensemble is the first entry point into *communitas* for the audience – this then was the jumping off point for creating the ensemble of *EveryMillennial*.

In his book, “Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue: The hope is Vital Training Manual” Michael Rohd defines the ensemble as a “working environment where participants feel comfortable playing and honestly sharing their thoughts and feelings.” In order to create the final piece, this definition became a working statement to base our own ensemble off of. The first step in establishing the ensemble was to create a contract

between the members separated into two categories, what we should expect to give to one another, and what we as individuals can expect from a group:

“What can we expect to give: hard work, focus, time, honest opinions, fun, ideas, respect, energy, no judgement, open mindedness, support, ears, cooperation.

What can we expect from the group: solidarity, productivity, energy, ability to take a minute, understand that there is a time for fun, comradery and professionalism, leaving troubles outside, smiles, hugs, and warmth.”

In addition to this contract amongst the group, a contract between leader and ensemble needed to be established. In building this *communitas* within the ensemble, I saw an ethical dilemma in declaring myself the “director” of the piece and group. By doing so, I was nervous in culling too much creative freedom from the group – for in the end I knew they needed to be open in their work to establish a sense of responsibility in and for the piece. But at the same time, this group was working toward a specific goal, and so needed guiding to accomplish this goal. The leader’s main responsibility is “in stimulating the atmosphere in which creation is possible” (Clark, 29); and in my own personal belief, in helping others achieve their full potential. How leadership arose was going to be an important question; it would influence exactly how the group devised the piece and how they interacted with each other. It all related back to the thesis: how do we work with an audience to establish *communitas* through the context of a theatrical production? Earlier, it was established that one of the necessary provisos included the sense of *communitas* as a group – something hard to bring about if a director was given 100% power and artistic choice.

The answer, then, was two-fold: first to ensure that the group was able to learn and understand the knowledge needed, and second to give the ensemble freedom in devising. I

had to be both a servant, and a leader. In 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf wrote *The Servant as Leader*, and coined the term servant-leader. The servant-leader “is servant first...it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong” (Greenleaf.org). This phrase seemed to fit well into the needs of the ensemble and production – something that allowed both creative freedom to the ensemble but also guidance in creating the piece. For this piece, I emphasized to the ensemble that throughout their process I would be an equal, albeit with a bit more knowledge on the process. By doing so, and helping the ensemble build, they naturally returned the power when it came to making final decisions concerning aesthetics and content. In the end, a servant-director had naturally occurred.

Building the ensemble was the most important task of this project. Without the achievement of ensemble, a piece will not develop as far as possible. In working with this ensemble, it is evident from their reactions that the idea of ensemble was integral in creating the project. Even though the nine individuals were very distinct personalities, through work on energy, trust, physicality and imagery they were able to overcome very heated differences to work together and find the shared experiences and beliefs. Rehearsals, or ‘happenings’ as the ensemble referred to them, started out at three times a week at approximately two hours each. Each happening focused on building the ensemble through the exercises listed above and gave them the opportunity to open up to each other. In the building of any relationship, you often must give something in order to receive something – and you want to make sure you’re both giving and receiving equally. “...The

goal is to look closely at choices, strategies and communication. To get to that place, you first must build trust, focus, and skills” (Rohd, 3).

The process then began to evolve. It is often clear from the product how the ensemble worked together to create the product. “The input and interest of a group of individuals determines how the work will proceed” (Oddey, 105). In this case, it was not only the interest of the group of individuals responsible for performing the product, but also the group of individuals responsible for providing the content. The ensemble had the responsibility of offering up different source materials to the group; these included images, articles, songs, videos, etc. To kick start the process, each member was handed two different source texts covering a variety of topics: the past decade, Millennials statistically speaking, stories of other millennials and non-millennials, and so on. Each happening, the members would bring back the source text with a few highlighted points they wanted to share and would do so, often causing discussion amongst the group. This is how most of our chapters were found: from open discussion on current events that impacted our world and then delving deeper into why they did so; what caused them; how do we respond to them and how they’ve been responded to, and how would we present such a thing? All of this discussion then became material for creating the final product, material already existing but garnered by the group in a meaningful way so as to personalize the information (Clark, 66).

For example, one night a member of the ensemble brought in *Life: The Decade that Changed the World* and shared some pictures of 9/11. Even though for most of the ensemble 9/11 occurred during the age of seven, eight, and nine, each of us could still identify with how going home from school felt and how are parents were reacting. From

there, it was only natural that the discussion evolve into how the tragic event affected the subsequent years and how even today, ramifications are still felt. Discussing the social and political state of America is not an easy thing, especially when it's with nine unique and sometimes opposing viewpoints. But through this dialogue, the ensemble was able to determine its first chapter: America. Dialogue, according to the philosopher Hegel, is one of the best tools for establishing the character of Self and Other in society (Guignon, 73). It was this dialogue, whether ambivalent or sometimes heated, that created tension in the group and lent passion to devising around it – it also taught the members how to work together in realizing and respecting each others' opinions and led to further discovery of their own self. From here, this discovery then led to other discoveries on topics, on the group, and how they viewed themselves. It's honesty at its most basic form: being true to oneself, and that allows for them to be completely true toward the audience and as other people.

After many discussions each night, the interviewing process began. Steps were laid out to gradually introduce the devisers to conducting interviews and then portraying these interviews with complete respect and honesty. We chose to work with direct interviews so that the ensemble would have a firm base when devising: first hand accounts, personal stories, and honest reactions. However, "even if the artists desire objectivity, they are always removed from the initial events and are thus constructing a *version* of the truth" (Bean). In devising, this can't be avoided – but we must rely as much as possible on the artist's sense of integrity. During the process, the ensemble raised a very important issue: all the members of the group were white, so how would we honestly represent any person of color? Again, the answer became to be as honest as possible to the words and actions

used by the person interviewed. Jacqueline Lawton, a noted black playwright and dramaturg, happened to have a week-in-residency during this project and offered the following advice: “[We] need to engage with the individual, hear their story and validate their experience. Find ways to acknowledge aspiring allyship and create room for compassion. Be mindful that we don’t know what we don’t know. We aren’t always aware of ourselves. We have to create a space for growth, learning, and discovery.” The ensemble then created this space not only during the process but also during the performance so as to communicate these stories with the respect each deserves.

“Have faith that the power of great storytelling will connect with the viewers heart. ... Fair, Accurate, Interesting, Thorough, Human” (Tompkins, 2). Storytelling was the primary method of communicating with the audience and sharing experiences of the millennial generation. Such stories allow the audience to ascribe a personal connection to the issue, a face, instead of just an understanding in-the-moment. Before the interview collection process begun, the ensemble brainstormed a guideline on conducting interviews. “People talk because they want to talk. The best I can do is to create a conducive environment” (Stewart, 88).

1. Be respectful; meet in a comfortable place on their time
2. Have a clear set of questions
3. Don’ be afraid to deviate from this set of questions
4. Ask open-ended questions
5. Pay attention not only to their voice, but also to their physicality
6. Give them time to answer, better answers can follow pauses
7. “Have I missed anything or is there anything you’d like to say?”

8. Finally, ask if they are comfortable in us using their interview during a theatrical performance.

Mock interviews were first conducted with pairs from the ensemble; so the ensemble could have a chance of putting the guidelines to the test before actually using them. The first assignment again gave the group a chance to be honest with each other and explore the meaning behind the story and presentation of it after. “[They] first examine who they are and how their stories operate as knowledge. Within this process young people see how their experiences ... relate to their sense of belonging in the world” (Alrutz, 77). After establishing a familiarity with the process of interviewing, the ensemble were assigned a series of interviews that included a good friend, a classmate, someone you wouldn’t normally see at school, a resident of the community, etc, so that the range of sources was widely varied. Just in the ensemble, we had varying political views, religious beliefs, sexualities, gender, and age; but our goal with using a variety of sources was to cover the widest range possible. This way, “they examine what personal stories suggest about society and it’s underlying value systems. Moreover, they explore how power is reinforced or disrupted by stories and personal experiences” (Alrutz, 77).

It was the sharing of these stories that, in the end, cemented the *communitas* amongst the performance. “By paying careful attention in moments like these to people’s words, one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large” (Kaufman). When working, *The Civilians* main goal is to “begin research into real experience and then, using elements of theatre, create new works that resonate with the pressing issues of the day.” Indeed, in this project as well the goal was to create new works that resonated with the pressing issues of the day – but we wanted to

take it one step further by inviting the audience to experience these issues for themselves; to immerse themselves into the world and gain an empathy for the events. “To reap the benefits of empathy, we must allow ourselves to be altered by the investment. Stories only succeed when we consent to suspend disbelief” (Bogart, 102.) It was essential that these stories we shared had personal meaning to the ones who told the stories. As performers, we had to suspend the disbelief in who we were – obviously we weren’t performing fictional monologues, but were we portraying ourselves or other millennials? “Characters are the mechanism we use to deliver information and tell the story. After all, people remember what they feel longer than what they know” (Tompkins, 42). Without personal meaning, there would be no empathy from the audience or from the performer. It is this fact that often brought our chosen topics such diversity. With such personal meaning in the story, we could talk directly and engage with our audience; we entered into a relationship. “Relationships require of us something similar: the ability to let go of our own worldview long enough to be intrigued and moved by someone else’s” (Bogart, 102).

A relationship is the foundation of any experience. Upon meeting another person, a relationship is immediately established – whether it’s positive or negative. In order to create a sense of *communitas* amongst the performance, the relationship became very important to the project. The first and most important relationship established was how the ensemble would work with each other. This provided the basis for the entire project. The next relationships were between myself, as servant-director, to the ensemble, and then between the ensemble and the interviewees. It was there that we started interacting with the audience, started asking the audience to be invested in our project thereby establishing the needed step toward empathy. Our last relationship to establish, but which the

groundwork for had already been laid, was the ensemble to the audience. We had worked hard to ensure that such a relationship could exist and be mutually beneficial. It was here that we returned to our main goal – to determine the identity of the millennial generation and see if the audience would join in experiencing it.

“One manifestation of theatre ... provided a peculiarly hospitable model for such human attempts at self-definition” (Read, 4). But this project didn’t stop at *self-definition*, it went so far so as to try definition by a group. These interviews displayed a wider reaching range of millennials; they were an attempt to collect every unique voice that was willing to speak. In presenting these interviews, we worked with the audience to attempt our definition – and discovered something unexpected. Many of the stories we were telling dealt with issues one might expect of any millennial: love, drugs, loss, jealousy, etc. But these stories also reflected the same experiences that older generations had also gone through when they were in college.

So, is there a difference?

That’s the question we left with the audience each night. At this time, an hour later and fifteen more experiences heavier, now it was the audiences’ job to determine where and how they were to define millennials. For many, they were surprised to hear such personal stories come out of their friends and family, for others, they felt empathy for the millennial generation but still chose not to define them, and yet still, there were the few who had this reaction: “... [A]s it went on I suddenly discovered that the experiences we have growing up may not be so different from generation to generation. I never had so many waves of different emotions go through me in an hour.” We had given the audience the chance to enter into a relationship with the ensemble and the experience.

EveryMillennial had one goal from the beginning: to create a sense of *communitas* within the context of a specific production. The ensemble made it even harder when the context itself, the story of millennials, limited how many people could innately connect to the material. But the ensemble had a saying: “it’ll mean something to someone;” and they were determined to make sure this project did.

During our last performance, the ensemble were competitively telling stories, yelling “stop!” whenever they had a story that fit in with another story and could take over talking. Each time we had done this sort of exercise, we made it clear to the audience that they could join in at anytime, even encouraged it, but it had yet to happen. This portion of the performance went on for a few minutes with stories about sexuality, sex, family, children, laughter, and happiness. And finally something happened. Out of nowhere, an audience member stood up, yelled “Stop!” and then shyly, but enthusiastically spoke: “Wait, I have a story. Can I tell it?”

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Millennial's: A Living Biography

An Honors Creative Thesis by Sean Byrne

Name: _____

Group: _____

Age: _____

Circle one: Freshman/ Sophomore/ Junior/ Senior

Please take a minute to describe your favorite book:

What do you feel defines the current generation?

Do you associate yourself with the "Me generation?" If not, why?

Attach a résumé or list the past shows you've participated in:

Please list any other/ special skills

Rehearsals will be twice a week until the month of February. This is a *real* commitment during which we will devise an hour length show and perform it. Please list any conflicts you have below; I am willing to work around most everything if you show dedication to the project.

Have I missed anything or is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you for auditioning.

Chrissy Johnson

EveryMillennial

Final Reflection

First and foremost, I would like to thank the faculty and peers that helped to guide and encourage Sean in such an exciting endeavor. It was an invaluable learning experience that will remain one of my best experiences at James Madison University. It has ignited my interest in Devised Theatre as its own art form. *EveryMillennial* also gave me the opportunity to explore character work, journalism, interviewing strategies, current events, viewpoints technique, and many other coveted skills to add to my “actor tool-box.” I am grateful to have been a part of such a unique and unforgettable process.

I am a junior Theatre Major at James Madison University with a concentration in education. I hope to work with a children’s theatre in their education department and eventually teach in a secondary school. This process has provided me with so much material that I can utilize in my future career. The ensemble that we created with Sean’s guidance was absolutely incredible. There are no words to describe the family that we all felt and continue to feel, even after this endeavor has come to a close. The community is something I hope to continue to inspire with young theatre-artists. Theatre is a collaborative art form that hones communication and teamwork skills, and Sean introduced us to many games that built our ensemble up and brought us together. Sean nurtured such an open and positive environment where we were able to discuss difficult and controversial subjects. We were allowed to make mistakes and experiment with our art in order to find meaning and tell a story. As an individual, I am very much an observer. By being in this piece and feeling so safe to talk about my opinions, I found my voice and

gained confidence in myself as a theatre artist. These are skills that any person working in a collaborative field can find so invaluable.

Additionally, this process had us explore current events and issues that are important to our generation. We conducted research on various texts and images, as well as took interviews, and brought them in to spark conversation. We explored how to create images of words and concepts with our bodies and this inspired many of the chapters of the final piece. The way in which actors holds themselves and makes angles with their body tells a story. Through the interviews, we memorized the language as well as the how they hold their body, how they moved, their speaking patterns, their unique quirks, etc. This truly brought to life how every character we create onstage from extant texts has their own deeply specific physicality, which is a concept that any actor needs to explore. It was so interesting how an actor would present one of their interviews, and other members of the ensemble could tell you that person's sex, an estimate of their age, and many other characteristics of that individual. Sean provided us with so many physical exercises and activities that aided us in becoming neutral so we were able to do justice physically to those we interviewed.

I also gained such an appreciation for devised theatre and how it is formed. Every idea is significant and deserves to be explored. There were times in rehearsal where an ensemble member would make a statement or action (sometimes both) and the ensemble would react to it honestly and go with it and see what happens. One rehearsal, Sean played the song "Happy" by Pharrell Williams and the actors danced and exclaimed what made them happy in that moment and what it meant to be happy. After a few beats of this, one of the ensemble members probed us as to why we 'should' be happy. Is it bad to be unhappy?

Is it socially unacceptable? What are the consequences of being unhappy and showing that you are unhappy? What are the consequences of faking happiness? These simple questions inspired one of the most moving and powerful conversations I have ever experienced.

Though it may seem inconsequential or irrelevant, this particular instance allowed us to explore the human condition. I have never had to argue the significance of being happy and why one should be happy. It was so powerful.

As a whole, our devised piece entitled *EveryMillennial*, gave us the opportunity to explore big ideas that are so relevant to our generation. They sparked conversations of worth and provoked thought on subjects that many may have never been introduced to before. I learned a great deal about my ignorance to topics of gender. An actor brought in an interview centered on gender and discrimination, and I learned about concepts through this interview that I did not even know existed. We were able to present issues in a non-biased manner and have a conversation with the audience through audience participation and talkbacks. Overall, it was a brilliant experience where I worked on my craft as an actor, prospective educator, and theatre artist.

Tyler Edwards

EveryMillennial: Final Reflection

You can never really know what is going to happen to you, that is, until it happens. In my case, I wasn't sure if I'd be accepted to JMU, I wasn't sure I'd make it into the School of Theatre and Dance, and I never expected... "Millennials". As starting freshman, I planned to audition as much as possible and try to hit the ground running. But, as is tradition in this line of work, I hit a wall of numerous rejections. It wasn't until Senior, Sean Byrne, announced his Senior Honors Thesis and my college experience was changed dramatically. Once again, I didn't expect to be accepted into the piece, and I didn't expect to meet some of the closest, most loving friends that I have ever made.

Being a part of this whole experience has given me new strength that I never knew I had. It has boosted my confidence so that, now, I feel like taking more risks and working with as many different people as I can. I can definitely say that I have grown from this experience, as an actor, deviser, and even as a person. Being able to come and work with a group of wonderful people every single day allowed me to escape reality and explore my imagination. The experience not only provided me with different views on the world, it provided me with healing. The environment we created was safe. It was a place that we all could feel comfort in. We weren't afraid to open up to one another and say what needed to be said. In doing this, we became very close. We became a family.

When it came time to show our experience to an audience, we were ready. I honestly think I was more ready than I have ever been to perform. It was brilliant. We had an amazing turnout of almost seventy people, and they loved it! There was nothing but praise heard from all who attended. After sharing our experience twice, almost one hundred people had viewed our

work. That feat alone feels amazing. We were able to tell people's stories. We opened people's eyes. This project meant something to somebody. Knowing this makes me feel truly satisfied, yet hungry for more. It is safe to say that I have been reassured that I was born to be a Theatre Artist.

I am going to miss the upperclassmen, and I am going to miss this Thesis, but I will take what I have learned and use it to grow even further. Being in the ensemble of *EveryMillennial* has been the highlight of my year. It may even be the highlight of my college career. I'll just have to wait and see what the future holds.

Jordan Clifford

All I can say about Sean Byrne's senior thesis "EveryMillennial," is that, "it happened." As menial as that statement may sound, it is not to be taken lightly. Things happened in this creative ensemble that unified complete strangers and made them a family. Aside from my biased appreciation of Sean's cast, this piece led to the discovery and performance of hidden truths as told by the millennial generation. Memories were made, friendships were built, and audiences responded positively.

As a devised-theatre virgin, the scariest concept to understand was that nothing was concrete. Knowing Sean's meticulous personality, I was surprised to see him loosen up on the reigns of the piece. At times, I was worried – anticipating (sometimes begging for) directive authority. With the inclusion of improvisational and physical exercises, the interviews were interwoven in the ensemble's creative storytelling. The final product was structured differently than Sean had originally visualized, but his ability to remain open-minded was imperative to the success of EveryMillennial. The performance resembled a newsfeed: scrolling through various topics with various interviews/sketches, while sometimes getting distracted or heavily concentrated on one particular subject. I mean, isn't that what happens whenever you see an interesting article on BuzzFeed? We click because we are interested and we want to read more. It may be assumed that EveryMillennial's downfall was its concentration on collegiate topics such as parties and hookup culture, but I believe such attentiveness is suitable when the artists range from 18-25 years old. I am beyond proud of the path that this ensemble chose to take with the piece and commend Sean for his ability to manage and direct us in a way that let us direct ourselves.

Throughout the rehearsal process, there were a few instances where drama sparked among the group, but I am positive it made us stronger. Inevitably, the issue was pure exhaustion with the occasional personal life interference. It's hard to leave baggage behind when entering a room of individuals you're encouraged to open up with. Somehow, Sean remained composed through it all – something I believe to be a trait of exceptional leadership. I will forever hold this piece in my heart.

Tyler Cramer

My Millennial Experience

As a Theatre/SMAD major, I am a very busy man. Some would say too busy. With this in mind, I feel that this was the one of the most expansive and wide ranging projects that I have been a part of. Pulling from multiple styles of theatre and performance, from the investigative theatre giving life to the interviews, to expressive movement prevalent in the Stress/Anxiety piece, I found myself traveling in multiple directions in all the right ways. I feel like the most important thing I learned from this experience is how to think outside the box theatrically. With constant schedule changes, varying assignments, audiences, locations, and materials, we really had to think quickly and imaginatively, sometimes on our feet, in order to produce a valuable artistic output. Addition, I gained further insights about what must be done in order to create and sustain the through line of the piece. As an ensemble we devised and developed many pieces that made it into the final product, but we also developed and experimented with just as many pieces which were ultimately cut. In our devising, the ensemble was key. We very much became a family, a family that while loving, argues and debates like a motherfucker. We were often able to find collaborative ways to reach our goals, but they were sometimes bogged down by disagreements. My critical thinking skills have grown as well as awareness of my peers, other Millenials, and even other generations. All in all, it was a great experience. I not only grew as a performer, but I also grew as a theatre artist.

D.J. Batchelor

During our process the phrase, “It will mean something to somebody,” was thrown around a lot with the joke that even if something does not make sense someone will make meaning out of it, and I can’t think of a better mantra to represent what this show meant to me. Before this show I was an actor. Cut and dry that was what I was and what I wanted to be. And if there is one thing I have learned from this show is that the idea of limiting myself to only being an actor is incredibly stupid and harmful. The world of theatre is a wide open one that is always expanding and changing. I can’t believe that I used to think I would never want to explore directing, devising, writing or dancing. The openness and accepting attitude of this process has showed me how important the rest of the theatrical spectrum is.

While I am obviously proud of the final product, I don’t think the viewing/showing/happening is what needs to be reflected on, but the process, which was equally as amazing. The strength of our group came from our ability to work as a team in spite of our differences. I think the group was created with the thought in mind to bring together people who would not normally work together, and that was done very well. I think that some of our best nights were the ones where we did not get along, when we did not mesh and when we flat out argued, because right when we were done we could put the process down and be friends. One of my favorite days was actually one where Sean was not present at all. We came to Forbes to find him at the ER taking care of another student. Instead of taking the day off we found a way to devise without him and create tinder which we were incredibly proud of and made the final cut. Other fond memories come from the nights where we would sit around and talked, most nights about nothing and everything at the same time. One night, after a rough couple of days the group helped me find my confidence and happiness again. After many nights of Dungeons and

Dragons, cast bonding, dinners, thinking and devising, this process has given me a group of co-collaborators that I will never lose.

Day to day rehearsal was good, however could be frustrating with scheduling. The group of people that we had were very busy and often could only meet from 10-12, and while those late hours of the night are often the most creative, they are exhausting. Often time there were nights where we were missing people and the process wasn't fully realized every night, but the nights we had everyone the gears truly turned. However outside of inconsistency in scheduling, which was inevitable with this group, the changes I would make are pretty nonexistent.

I realize that this review/reflection/summary is short and sweet but it's because I don't find too much merit in ranting and raving. This process was exactly what I needed as an artist to set me on the right track and open my horizons. I don't have much more to say other than thank you to my collaborators and to Sean. He provided the perfect amount of freedom to explore and direction to take to push the process in the right direction. On a more personal note Sean was very supportive of me specifically and has made it known to me how much he cares for and is rooting for me. That means the world to me. So yeah this show meant something to somebody, it means a new confidence, outlook and group of friends to me.