

The Talk

by Sonny Kelly

The Talk is a one-man performance that draws on the voices of ancestors, elders, youths, and intellectuals to engage in the difficult conversations that we must have with our children as we prepare them to survive and thrive in a divided America. This eclectic theatrical experience weaves together storytelling, interactive theater, literature, a dynamic embodied performance, and a multi-media production to engage audiences in critical conversations around reconciliation.

The Talk was born of a painful conversation that I had to have with my son upon hearing about protests and riots in the streets of West Baltimore, MD, in the wake of Freddie Gray's death in 2015. I had no choice but to explain the cause of all of this mayhem. Ultimately, it was a black man. Looking into the back seat, I beheld a beautiful black boy, who would one day grow up to become a black man - a black man, who would look an awful lot like the pictures I had seen on CNN of the now deceased Freddie Gray. I realized then that it was time to have a father-son "talk" about identity and survival. How do you explain to a child the fact that he faces a world that often condones and enacts violence against bodies that specifically look like his? It took me a week to digest the anguish that this awkward conversation had caused me. The result was "Sterling's Story," an 8-minute narrative about my love for my son. When I learned that "Sterling's Story" was part of a larger phenomenon known as "The Talk," I knew that I had to do more with this story. I knew that it could begin to humanize the racialized politics of issues like "stop and frisk," "zero tolerance" school policies, and the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline." Over the course of two years, I developed *The Talk* alongside my director and dramaturge UNC Chapel Hill Artist in Residence, Joseph Megel. What has emerged is a dynamic piece of theater that is, at times, more experience than performance. *The Talk* made its professional debut in January of 2019 at The Durham Fruit Co. as a co-production of Street Signs Center for Literature & Performance, Bulldog Theater Ensemble, and UNC Chapel Hill's Department of Communication. Video Design: Zavier Taylor; Audio Design: Michael Betts II ; Lighting Design: Elizabeth Grimes Droessler; Set Design: Rob Hamilton; Stage Manager: Carol Land; Dramaturge: Elisabeth Lewis Corley.



This experience includes a post-show talk-back and pursues three objectives: to mobilize performance toward the end of developing a critical consciousness around race issues in America today; to incite action toward more just, equitable, and honest interpersonal interactions in our society; and finally, to give voice to an anguish that parents of color, and especially parents of black boys, endure daily.

Today, I perform *The Talk* for diverse audiences at universities, schools, theaters, and communities across the U.S. By performing narratives that explore the trauma that marginalization inflicts on human bodies and minds I invite audience members to experience with me what Augusto Boal (1995) calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to imagine new possibilities together.

The Talk
by Sonny Kelly

The Talk as Artistic Process

This project has confirmed for me the truth that an artist's work should be a direct outgrowth and manifestation of their personal lived experience. Our artistic work is ultimately, an aesthetic expression of our own deeply held truths. If we want our work to matter and to last, we must go beyond mode, medium, and marketability to dig deeper into the root of the work – our truth, and our need to tell it visually, verbally, musically, and/or kinesthetically.

The most profound and memorable art that we produce is not done simply because we are good at it, or because we feel like it – it is done because it compels us. This requires that we ask some serious questions of ourselves throughout the process of developing, creating and presenting our best work. Why does this work matter? Why do I feel that I *have* to do this work? What do I want this work to *do* in the world? What is this work *doing* to/in me? What is my truth, and how is this work centered in, and guided by, that truth?

While we should not feel the need to explain every detail of the art we create, we should indeed have an idea of what the work is doing in us and around us. Dramatist Peter Brook (1996) argues that “A word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behavior which dictate the need for expression” (p. 12). He goes on to declare, “I have learned that the best dramatists explain themselves the least” (p. 13). Replace the word “dramatist” with “artist,” and we can apply this concept to any field of art. When our work is rooted in our truth and driven by purpose, it can speak powerfully for itself, lending itself to clear and concise descriptions.

Critical performance practitioner Augusto Boal (1995) privileges performance spaces as “*spaces of liberty* where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (p. 5). Performance theorist Diane Taylor (2004) argues that the *performative repertoire* (our portfolios and bodies of creative work) is actually a valid source of knowledge, on par with any academic book or report. When we honor our work in this way, as activated truth, it stands for something more than ornamentation or production – something timeless and more relevant than ever.

Works Cited

Boal, Augusto (1979). *Theater of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Urizen Books.
Boal, Augusto (1995). *The rainbow of desire*. New York, NY: Routledge.
Brook, Peter (1968/1996). *The empty space*. New York, NY: Touchstone
Taylor, Diane (2004). *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.