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# Life as Performance

By Hannah Blevins Harvey

Imagine, if you will, a powerful link:

- ▷ A link between cultural anthropology, sociology, drama, oral interpretation of literature, literary criticism, folklore, mythology and psychology.
- ▷ A link between the creative process of making art and the critical process of analyzing performances — both staged performances, such as plays in which a trained artist applies a skill, and community events, those ritual-like performances of everyday life.
- ▷ A link between “performing” our professional and social roles, telling a joke or a folktale, and staging community spectacles such as parades, circuses, sports, weddings, the Olympics and public hangings, all of which follow a set order that combines the visual and the auditory and conveys meaning.

Almost everyone who attended Furman has a special memory about an activity, organization or program in which they were involved.

One of my fondest memories was developing my own major through the Individualized Curriculum Program, which typifies the kind of engaged learning and personalized academic experience that attracted many of us to Furman in the first place. My major in “Communication, Writing and Performance” propelled me into graduate studies, international performances and intercultural storytelling, all of which are directly linked to the interdisciplinary spirit that an ICP encourages and inspires.

Recently I had the opportunity to teach a series of workshops in intercultural storytelling in Morocco with students from Kennesaw State University, where I was an assistant professor of theatre and performance studies, and Hassan II University in Casablanca. The interdisciplinary nature of this and similar projects in which I have participated has made me all the more grateful for the foundation that Furman gave me to search between disciplines for opportunities to learn, grow and perform.

Like many in Furman’s Class of 2001, my academic and extracurricular interests were varied. As a freshman I was involved in theatre productions and took classes in communication studies. But my love of literature, curiosity about anthropology, and experience as a public storyteller kept pulling me somewhere between and beyond these fields.

My sophomore year I worked with professors Doug Cummins (theatre arts), Stan Crowe (English), Linda Julian (English) and David Sargent (communication studies) to design my own major. I didn’t know it at the time, but this “yearning” for something that crossed disciplines — to analyze and interpret the human experience through the holistic lens of performance — was actually the burgeoning field of performance studies, which I studied further while pursuing my Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina.

An alumna shows students how our daily experiences reveal personal and cultural stories that shape our identities — and help to promote greater understanding.

Performance studies is a relatively new and evolving academic discipline that analyzes not just traditional art forms but everyday experience as “performance” — looking at the various roles we play (mother, son, co-worker), the costumes we wear, the scripts we follow, the rituals of daily life, the “given circumstances.” Humans are storytelling creatures, and through our daily experiences we tell personal and cultural stories to one another. These stories shape our identities and help us better understand each other.

Performance studies emerged from the fields of theatre, anthropology and communication studies, preparing students to pursue careers that connect artistry, advocacy and academic inquiry. Graduates are often called “scholar-artists” who create original performance works highlighting the concerns of both local and global communities. They have developed thriving theatres in Chicago, become professional actors and directors, and pursued careers as folklorists, playwrights and teachers.

### Cultural exchange

Last summer, a colleague and I were invited to Morocco to teach performance studies at Hassan II University. Located in the Ben M’Sik community, the largest and poorest of Casablanca’s six districts, Hassan II offers a high-quality education to a traditionally underserved population.

Hassan II also sponsors an annual international university-based performance festival with participants from Poland, France, Spain, Morocco and other parts of Africa. Ours was the first American group to be invited to the festival, and we wanted to do more than just “bring a show overseas.” We wanted our students to interact with their counterparts at Hassan II. Workshops in storytelling and oral history seemed the perfect opportunity to forge these connections.

We partnered our 10-member cast of undergraduate students with about 20 graduate students in American Studies at Hassan II who spoke fluent English. Our

workshops culminated in a public performance of each others’ stories.

As Hassan professor Samir El Azhar told me on the drive from the Casablanca airport to Hotel Diwan, “There are many Casablancas in Casablanca.” Samir took us on a tour of Hassan II, then drove us through the Ben M’Sik neighborhood.

Ben M’Sik is the most densely populated district in Casablanca. The tin roofs of some homes were held in place by heavy stones, and women stood on the balconies of their apartments hanging colorful purple, red and yellow fabrics to dry on drooping lines. This neighborhood had developed as a housing area for immigrants from Morocco’s drought-ridden interior region. Abdelmajid Kaddouri, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, told us, “You know the true Morocco, [because you are] coming to a poorer place.”

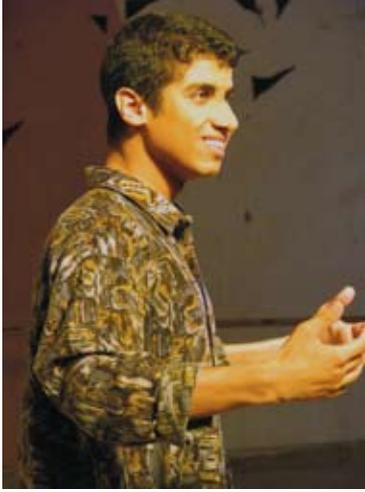
Though impoverished, the neighborhood is rich in cultural heritage. Kennesaw State has partnered with Hassan II over the past six years to help develop a museum to honor the area’s rich oral histories and serve the local community. The museum will be the first of its kind in the Islamic world. We hoped that our oral history collaborations with Hassan II students — most of whom are second-generation residents of Ben M’Sik — and the culminating public performance would contribute to the growing archives of the community museum.

During our first two workshops, students worked in small groups in which they talked about culturally specific gestures, customs, superstitions and rules. They then shared stories about their family trees, discussing their relatives and working from specifics of people, place, characters, objects, action and time. The small groups developed short storytelling performances based on their interview partners’ family histories — each telling the other’s story.

The goal of such collaborative performance is to better



In Morocco, the author (above, second from right) and Kennesaw State students joined 20 native graduate students for workshops and public performances.



know others and ourselves, and to use stories to travel to each others' worlds. When you perform someone else's story, you have to *become them* during the moment of performance — much as characters in a scripted play do. Such performances help us enter into dialogue with one another, examine our differences, and see ourselves from another person's vantage point.

Sean, a Kennesaw State student, described his experience during these first workshops: "I had a partner named Wafaa. She and I had a conversation about love. She kinda blew my mind. Here's how it went:

- Sean:** I believe love is a wave. You have to appreciate it but know it may not last forever.
- Wafaa:** That is not right. If you love someone, hold on to them.
- Sean:** Well, I believe that if you hold on to something you will crush it.
- Wafaa:** But you are being selfish. You would say to your love, "I love you today, but maybe not tomorrow."
- Sean:** But there is no way to know!
- Wafaa:** If it is your one true love you will know.
- Sean:** You believe in there being only one person in the entire world you can love?
- Wafaa:** Yes, because you have only one heart.
- Sean:** But I have been in love with more than one person.
- Wafaa:** You were not really in love with them.
- Sean:** How can you say that? You do not know what I felt.
- Wafaa:** Are you still in a relationship with them?
- Sean:** No.
- Wafaa:** Then it was not true love. If it was true, you would have fought with everything and not given up to be with them.

**Sean:** But what about holding on? You can't argue that holding on too tightly can be destructive to individuals. It would make them feel bound to you and they could lose their inability to grow individually. Right?

PAUSE.

**Wafaa:** Then don't hold on too tightly.

We had hoped that our workshops would enable students to have meaningful conversations and debates with their partners. As a result of this dialogue — and despite the friction between them — Sean's respect for Wafaa grew, and he may even have broadened his mind about a few things.

In the context of troubled United States-Arab relations and increasing tensions between the Muslim world and the West, this moment had a profound effect on Sean. After we returned home, he and Wafaa continued their discussion over Facebook. We also saw the students begin to shift roles, becoming co-performers with each other. Sean moved from observing from a detached distance to engaging with Wafaa as a unique individual.

### 'Aha!' moments

The third workshop, in which students partnered and rehearsed re-telling each others' stories, proved to be a turning point for the group, as the relationships between the students seemed to crystallize. Learning each other's personal narratives was revelatory for many, as they found unexpected commonalities among poignant experiences, such as moving physically and culturally from rural to urban spaces; rites of passage, as when a student named Hakima described waiting on her university entrance exam test scores; and the ways that students experienced and remembered loss (such as Sean and Wafaa's shared ties to loved ones who had died) — remembered via the keepsakes each carried that had belonged to the dead.

We reviewed our experiences from the workshops and explained to the students that the various exercises — sharing culturally specific gestures, customs, superstitions and rules; bringing and sharing with partners an object that had special



After sharing their stories, the students created “still poses” and expressed the belief, value, struggle or desire represented by the poses. Photos courtesy Hannah Harvey.

meaning; telling partners about an embarrassing moment and significant memory; discussing family rituals — had all been seeds for stories.

We asked the students to consider what difference it makes to experience these emotional reactions with each other. How does live storytelling (and listening) deepen your understanding of one another? After considering these questions, we asked the students to write down two specific moments from the workshops that had been particularly compelling or meaningful to them. We also asked them to write down one emotion, or “Aha!” moment — a moment when they understood something new about themselves, their culture or another’s.

One student found similarities between his experiences and values growing up in rural Georgia with those of his partner, a young man raised in a conservative rural community outside Casablanca. The Moroccan man’s cultural heritage was Amazigh, or native Moroccan, one of three main cultural groups in Morocco. The American student came to understand, through their shared values, how similar America’s “Southern gentleman” and Morocco’s “Amazigh” can be.

Another student’s epiphany came through learning his partner’s perspective. Hakima told Ralph, her American partner, “I actually used to be really afraid of foreigners. Americans were so violent. But since I met my friends from Canada, I treat them as family. I realized through them that foreigners weren’t mean or angry; they were like me. Like you, they were different, but not as scary as I thought.” Hakima’s honesty made Ralph reconsider his own trepidations about coming to this “foreign” place.

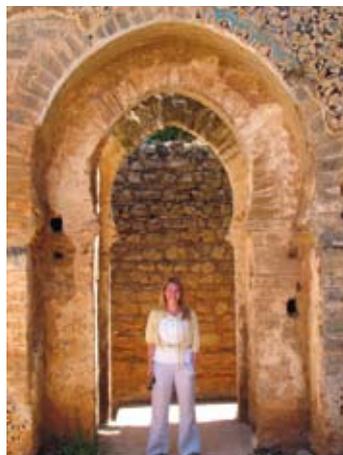
In groups of four, the students shared what they had written, each person choosing one thing to tell their group. The groups then created a “still pose” for each of the stories. One person verbally explained the pose as the other three shaped themselves as parts of or characters in the story, standing in relation to one another with frozen gestures, facial expressions and postures. Each member of the still pose then voiced the belief, value, struggle or desire they were expressing.

The students performed some of these tableau-stories, in addition to folktales and other stories, in public on the Hassan II campus. Their presentations, and the act of rehearsing and creating these performances, enabled them to demonstrate to each other how co-performance can generate dialogue, debate and shared understanding.

The performances by our Moroccan and American students exist as a fledgling installation in the growing exhibits of the Ben M’Sik Community Museum. In thinking about our work with Hassan II, which has continued thanks to a generous grant from the U.S. Department of State, I am grateful to the faculty and programs at Furman that encourage and inspire interdisciplinary work, engagement with the global community, and dialogue across borders.

Furman fostered an environment in which students could see between disciplines to create something new for ourselves and for others. I look forward to collaborating on other projects similar to the one with Hassan II. Every time I do, I know I’ll be drawing on what Furman gave me. [F]

Visit [www.kennesaw.edu/theatre](http://www.kennesaw.edu/theatre) to learn more about the discipline of performance studies. The introduction to this article and description of performance studies are taken from the website, with permission.



Hannah Blevins Harvey is managing editor of the journal *Storytelling, Self, Society, and* president of *Storytelling in Higher Education*, a special interest group of the National Storytelling Network. She and her husband, Joseph, now live on their working farm in Kingsport, Tenn. They welcomed a son, Cahill, on April 28.