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Empowering Community Change through Story Circles and Theatre at Salve Regina University

BY CYNTHIA MWENJA, PhD

Tara Brooke Watkins, assistant professor and director of the theatre arts program at Salve Regina University (SRU), collaborates with communities to create theatrical productions that emerge from the communities' own experiences and needs. At each step throughout the process, participants experience positive—often life-changing—impacts, demonstrating the profound potential of theatre for engendering meaningful personal and social change.

Power of Theatre

Watkins performed as an actor throughout her childhood, and she continued focusing on theatre arts for her college career. She eventually realized, however, that she wanted to do more with theatre than represent only one person's story on stage—though at the time she did not have any models for professional alternatives beyond being an actor or director. What Watkins did know was that she had two goals for her theatrical career: helping people to become more capable, while simultaneously helping them feel less alone.

When Watkins enrolled in Emerson College's MA in Theatre Education program, she began to encounter approaches which could help her reach her goals. In working with Robbie McCauley—a visionary and multi-talented professor, scholar, and performing artist—Watkins gained both a mentor and a friend who taught techniques of devising plays informed by story circle interactions. Story circles are guided opportunities for groups to share personal experiences relating to a common theme. These techniques

allow the people involved to engage in actively listening to one another. The possibilities of this powerful combination of deep listening and sharing real narratives were life-changing for Watkins; she began to anchor her own playwrighting method in this impactful practice. Watkins has now repeatedly seen how this approach to theatre can help people truly interact with one another throughout the script development process—and be changed by their shared experiences at every point.

Story Circle Theatre

Watkins' process for developing shows includes many threads woven together for the final product. Each production is grounded in deep research on the community and subject at hand. Once she has begun to assemble that information, she then further cultivates her relationship with the community she will be working with, always prioritizing the community's needs and desired outcomes.

When Watkins begins facilitating story circles for the project, she first leads participants in community-building exercises, then offers a conduit into circle work by reading a

story related to the topic at hand. As Watkins notes, the conduit itself shows each participant that they are not alone; someone else has shared some aspect of their own life experiences. The story also provides the context for participants to answer a question related to the theme the group is working with, such as "When has your story been changed by others?" or "When has someone stolen something from you?"

Once a volunteer answers the question first, sharing turns pass around the circle from there. Participants are asked to hold any judgements they have in response to others; no one asks questions or interrupts, and everyone is asked to avoid preparing their own story when someone else is talking. After everyone who wishes to speak has their turn, then space can be opened for cross talk; at that point, everyone feels safe and honored, having been heard without judgement.

After each story circle that Watkins holds with community members, she has them participate in theatre exercises so they have

a chance to process the emotions that may have come up during the circle time. These exercises are tailored to each particular circle experience and might include activities such as a positivity mirroring exercise, a tableau, interview pairs, or writing a monologue in another circle participant's voice. Watkins often later learns that people have made big, positive life changes as a direct result of their participation in story circles and the subsequent theatre activities.

Watkins draws on all of these community interactions to develop a script, then casts and directs the show, ultimately performing it for the community from which it emerged. As she is developing the production, she is also asking the community what they would like people to be inspired to do in response to attending the performance; audience members receive information so that they can join in working for change after the show closes. The price of admission is often tailored to the production, as well. For a piece focused on PFAS (forever chemicals), they accepted Teflon pans and

microwave popcorn bags as "tickets." For a play centered on unhoused people, admission was a package of socks. Her goal with each production is that it will create real, positive, and lasting change in and for the community.

Storytelling Theatre Productions

Watkins has used her methods to produce several plays, with more currently in development. Themes of her work span a variety of vital human issues, including gender identity, homelessness, environmental concerns, race relations, and more. In 2014, Watkins wrote the first iteration of The Bible Women's Project, which she continues to re-work through ongoing story circles with young, predominantly Christian women. The circles and performance focus on the effects that traditional church experiences have had on women's understanding of themselves and their roles as women. Watkins states that hearing other women's stories often gives participants the courage to risk sharing their own, even on difficult topics that they have never previously discussed. She appreciates

the authority that the play has with Christian audiences due to its grounding in Biblical history.

For Watkins' doctoral work in her hometown of Tulsa, she wanted to find ways to help heal the huge divide in the city between Black and White people, as well as finding ways to tell the story of Black Wall Street and the Tulsa race massacre from Black perspectives. Because she was determined to ensure that community needs would guide the project, she carefully researched that history. She also taught drama in a grant-funded position at the Greenwood Cultural Center, which focuses on Black Wall Street and Black entrepreneurship; in this role, she wrote and directed an original play for students in the summer arts program to perform.

After gathering data and getting to know people in the community, Watkins approached community leaders with the idea for the theatrical production, basing it in story circles which—while focused on Black

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Tulsans' experiences—were attended by Tulsa residents of varying racial backgrounds. The groups discussed race relations in the city, which is still functionally segregated; all of the participants had genuine questions about the history and situation that they had never had the opportunity to ask. While such discussions could easily result in conflict if mismanaged, Michelle Burdex, Program Coordinator and Cultural Architect at the Greenwood Cultural Center, affirms that Watkins created a “welcoming, authentic environment in which all participants felt truly safe asking and answering questions.” Burdex points out that Watkins gained the community’s trust before proposing the project; that was what allowed the process to be successful.

Once the group was assembled, Watkins set the stage as the discussion facilitator for the months-long series of story circles, emphasizing that the group’s goal was to develop understanding of one another. Even though the conversations were often challenging, everyone was committed in good faith to fully

absorbing what others said. After taking in accounts from Tulsa massacre survivors, the group began sharing their own stories about how each member had experienced racism. Burdex felt heard when she shared that they are still discovering the truth and coming to terms with the massacre and what was lost. The mass graves investigation is currently ongoing; bodies have been newly identified even now in 2026.

Burdex states unequivocally that working with Watkins and participating in these story circles changed her life. She attributes the transformative quality of Watkins’ work to her humble attitude, kind personality, and transparent approach; these characteristics allow and invite participants to be honest in return. Burdex recalls that she saw change happening for the participants through their shared experience of being in the circle together; everyone returned to their communities with new understanding of and compassion for one another. While Burdex appreciated the theatrical production that came out of the process, it was the story circles for her that were the

most powerful part of the experience—and the part that led to the most lasting change.

Watkins highlights how the play “became a bridge” for diverse audiences. A prominent Black leader pointed out in the post-show talkback that the performance had brought them all together, concluding, “that’s why we need the arts.” Additionally, ticket revenues were given to the Greenwood Cultural Center to help fund a museum regarding the massacre; the weekend’s box office raised \$15,000 toward this initiative. All of these results show the variety of transformative outcomes that theatre can bring about.

Working with Students

Emma Corcelli, 2026 SRU graduate, deeply appreciates Watkins’ approach to teaching theater, noting that she uses the way each student best learns to help them grasp the material. Corcelli values how profoundly Watkins influenced her view on theatre; their work together ultimately led to Corcelli’s decision to become a theatre educator herself. In fall 2026, she will begin working as a



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Kindergarten teacher, with the goal of establishing a theatre arts program at her school.

As a student at SRU, Corcelli used Watkins' devised theatre techniques to conduct a year-long community engagement and education program at a local middle school. She ran acting workshops, led storytelling circles, and guided group discussions, then used those experiences to create a play for the young actors. As a result, Corcelli reports, she now thinks of "everything in that way—as listening and responding" to a community.

Victoria Gonzalez, assistant professor of Sociology at SRU, says that she and Watkins share a "desire to do more for the community as agents of social justice." One way they each do so is through SRU's Commission on Mercy Culture, which Watkins currently chairs. According to its website, this body promotes SRU's mission "by turning empathy into action"; it "responds to individuals' needs by actively listening and seeking solutions that foster inclusivity." As Gonzalez puts it, the group strives to "meet real needs in real
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time.” One concern she brought to Watkins was that of the multiple challenges students were navigating in relation to social media. Following their in-depth conversation, Watkins decided to dedicate a devised theatre class to the idea the following term.

Watkins and her class used her powerful script-development process to create an immersive production entitled *A Social Media Carnival*, which examines the ways that social media can work to keep people separate and “in their own heads,” as Watkins says. Each audience member was able to choose a track—that of a first-year student, an LGBTQIA+ student, or a faculty member. As audience members itinerated through the performance venue, the actors at each station performed specific scripts for each of the audience’s roles. The production was so well-received in March 2026 that Watkins has been asked to revive it for new student orientation each year. She notes that this request shows that people recognize the power for change that this type of theatre holds.



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