

THE SEX MYTH

A DEvised

PLAY



PLAYBOOK

AND LICENSING

By Hanne Larsen, with Foreword by Rachel Hills
Additional edits by Rebecca Kenigsberg

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FOREWORD

Never in my career as a feminist writer have I felt such potential for the reach of the ideas I care about as I did when watching Hanne Larsen's devised theatre adaptation of my book *The Sex Myth* in June 2016.

The show was personally and politically explosive: a series of eight emotionally intimate monologues drawn from the lives of the cast, interspersed with shorter scenes riffing on issues like hook-up culture, celibacy, kink, sexual performance, gender roles, coming out and more, along with direct quotes from the text of the book. As Hanne will share with you over the pages that follow, it had a profound impact on both the performers who created it and the people who came to see it, sparking transformative, critically-engaged conversations about the sexual culture we live in and the way that culture shapes our own expectations and experiences.

It had a profound impact on me as well.

I wrote *The Sex Myth* because I believe in the power of words and ideas to change lives. I remember well the authors that introduced me to feminism; how their words cracked open the world for me, helping me to place my experiences into a bigger, more collective picture. I wrote *The Sex Myth* because I wanted to write a book that would have the same impact on other people that those books had had on me.

But there is something very special about seeing something you've created be recreated in someone else's hands; about watching it move beyond you and begin to belong to other people.

My favorite thing about this show is that it remakes itself each time a new group of people perform it. If you decide to produce a performance of *The Sex Myth*, you won't be telling Hanne's story, or mine. You will be telling your stories, and the stories of the people in your cast and community, using the framework we have provided.

And that process is like nothing else. As a creator, you will engage with the issues you're working on more deeply than you would performing an ordinary, scripted play. Your audience will feel a deeper connection with your work. And best of all? You will be part of a movement of people around the world working to rewrite our collective sexual stories.

This is how we change culture. This is how movements are made: when ideas are shared, adapted, and repurposed in the hands of new groups and communities.

I hope you will join us in this journey, and spark your own Sex Myth Revolution.

Rachel Hills

Author of The Sex Myth

February 2017

INTRODUCTION

Recently, my Communication and Gender professor asked us to share our female heroes. My hand shot up, and I said, “Rachel Hills. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be in this class right now.”

It is due to Rachel’s influence that I can declare confidently that I am a feminist, a courageous artist and director, and am empowered to make more informed choices in today’s sexual culture.

Had I not walked into Rachel’s workshop at Northeastern University in the fall of 2015, I might still be blushing or quietly removing myself from conversations about sex and not critically looking at society’s values around it. I would not be here right now encouraging you to jump in and be a part of this dialogue.

I was rehearsing for *The House of Bernarda Alba* when the director recommended I attend the workshop to complement the play’s themes about oppression of female sexuality. I knew nothing about *The Sex Myth*, and did not expect my outlook to be transformed in the span of two hours.

Rachel effortlessly created an open, friendly, and fact-based environment where everyone in the room could openly talk about sex and the sexual climate. I leaned forward in my seat, simultaneously excited and afraid. I could talk about sex? In public? In an academic way? I felt a comfort, confidence, and new frontier opening within myself all at once. Things didn’t seem as mysterious anymore.

Having grown up in secular Muslim Turkey and attending a Protestant high school, my views and feelings about sex were colored with shame. But I also grew up with a liberal family that had no qualms about sex. These two cultures, conservative and liberal, lay calmly in my identity until I began college in the United States. Suddenly, my identity was in flux, and I wanted experience freedom.

However, there was still a sense of shame or embarrassment generally crashed over me when it came to conversations about sex in academic classes or online feminist conversations. Sex on campus was exciting, and a bit scary. I couldn’t quite reconcile my caution around sex with my desire for the sexual freedom that everyone else seemed to have. I felt incomplete.

Rachel shared the similar story of the conversation that set her on the path of writing *The Sex Myth*. It led her to look more critically not just at the narratives that were circulating around young people and hookup culture at the time, but the stories circulating around desire, desirability, heteronormativity, and sexual performance as well.

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As Rachel shined a light onto previously mysterious and unquestioned assumptions I had made about hook-up culture, I felt a sense of relief. The rules and expectations I had internalized about how sex should be were transformed into social norms that I could investigate, understand, and then choose to adhere to or not.

Rachel's workshop also helped me realize that I have a voice in this conversation. In the past, I'd seen heated arguments where discussions of sexuality, stigmas, and discrimination would turn sour if a person said something wrong. These conversations made me feel vulnerable. I didn't want to say the wrong thing accidentally, and I wasn't sure what my opinions actually were. So I didn't say anything. The workshop, and later, reading *The Sex Myth* gave me confidence to face my fears. I wanted to know what I believed, and what I wanted.

Rachel accepted my invitation to see my performance of *House of Bernarda Alba*.

Afterwards, we created a working relationship, when I lay the groundwork for adapting *The Sex Myth* into a devised theatre piece.

This play allowed me to take the conversation about *The Sex Myth* into the physical realm to reflect the paradoxes, stigmas, expectations, and unspoken stories of my peers. I wanted to connect this conversation with young people who, like me, may have not had the chance to be a part of it yet, and to present a judgment free perspective on sex. I wanted students to realize that what they perceived as fixed truths were actually choices.

I wanted them to know that their lives did not have to fit the cookie-cutter expectations of hookup culture, purity culture, heteronormativity, or any other cultural framework.

This project excitingly did reach and impact the people around me, and it was an incredible blessing to be able to connect with them through the performance and the talkbacks. Rachel and I are sharing this playbook so other communities can create their own devised performances. My hope is that this conversation grows and spreads so that more people can make more empowered decisions and become more self-aware. You can be a part of this. You don't have to be complacent as *the Sex Myth* exercises its power over you and around you. You can play a role by questioning, deciding, and acting on your accord. Join me--it'll be fun!

Hanne Larsen

February 2017



GETTING STARTED



New York City
Rehearsal, 2017

What Is Devised Theatre?

One of the most important aspects of this project is that it is devised, a form of experimental theatre in which a piece is created through collaboration, rather than a single author. There is plenty of room to explore to bring together a myriad of different techniques to create your material.

Some rehearsal techniques include, but are not limited to, Suzuki, Viewpoints, and contact improvisation to help build the ensemble members' technique and connection with other another. Suzuki is a philosophy developed by the acclaimed director Tadashi Suzuki. It has foundations in ballet, traditional Greek and Japanese theatre, and martial arts. The method emphasizes the actor's body over text, and its rigorous training allows players to sharpen their emotional and physical ability and presence on stage.

Viewpoints can be used in both source work and in the eventual composition of the show.

The sets derive from basic principles of movement: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition, shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography. It is uniquely a non-hierarchical format of creating theatre.

Contact improvisation is a form of dance that begins with a point of contact between two bodies that share communication through gravity, momentum, and inertia. It is another method in which performers gain awareness of their bodies and strengthen their intuition.

In the latter half of the rehearsal process, we all collaborated to generate, define, and develop the vocabulary of this piece. This was achieved through our exercises and creative monologues and poems based on personal experiences. Our text compositions stemmed from free-writing workshops.

Some additional examples of techniques include Jean Hamilton's Floor Barre, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body-Mind Centering, and Allan Wayne Work.

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To learn more about devised theatre, I would recommend the following books:

- Anne Bogart and Tina Landau's *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (Theatre Communications Group, 2004; ISBN-10: 0873388283), specifically the chapter "Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Composition: What Are They?"
- Arthur Bartow's *Training of the American Actor* (Theatre Communications Group, 2006; ISBN-10: 1559362685), specifically Mary Overlie's essay on "The Six Viewpoints."
- Tadashi Suzuki's *Culture is the Body: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki* (Theatre Communications Group, 2015; ISBN-10: 1559364963)



Photography by Jody Christopherson
New York City Production, 2017

Casting

One of the core elements of licensing *The Sex Myth* is ensuring the diversity within the ensemble: in terms of sex, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and areas of study. The cast should not, and cannot under our licensing agreement, encompass all straight, all white, all one-gender cast. The broad array of experiences need to be represented to ensure there is no one authority over these topics.

An important element of casting the devised piece is to refrain from standard auditions. Often casting calls can be shared through various networks through Theatre and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments, or different social media and campus-wide events. For the most part, the ensemble should be cast based off of interest and availability over previous

performance experiences. This is a wonderful opportunity for students of all academic backgrounds and interests to take part in the movement.

Cast members are needed at every rehearsal. This is crucial: material cannot be created or refined if ensemble members are missing.

Assistant Director

The assistant director serves as a support and key collaborator with the director. Together, the director and assistant director plan themes to cover each week. The assistant director is also a sounding board for the director's thoughts throughout the process. Another important characteristic of the assistant director for a devised piece like this is being responsive to what is happening in the room and amongst the cast, to find solutions, and to always be a part of the conversation.

Stage Manager

The stage manager records the rehearsals and performances, taking notes and filming to document the entire process. This is important because of the experimental nature, and it does not adhere to a script. Good documentation allows you to go back to specific moments to see how the project evolves. You can go back later and continue developing the show more easily as well. A stage manager also keeps rehearsals on track, communicates with actors about the schedule, and "calls" the show, ensuring all design elements hit their cues.

Dramaturg

The dramaturg brings in external research based on things we've talked about in rehearsal. Building upon the themes your show begins to hone in on,

the dramaturg can make your exploration of those themes deeper by leading discussions. The dramaturg also leads the talkbacks in which he or she creates questions for the audience to ponder and discuss about the performance.

Marketing and Social Media

In addition to getting the word out about the show, forming partnerships with affiliated groups, the marketing team works with the Dramaturg and Director on ways to critically engage your audience with the show's subject matter. When you purchase rights to produce this show, *The Sex Myth* team will provide you with an assortment of professionally designed materials you can use to promote the show in your community, including editable files for posters, and social media assets.

Feel free to take rehearsal videos and photographs, record short interviews, and reach out to campus newspapers and event pages.

Make sure to use

#thesexmyth, so that we can share your work on our own Twitter and Instagram accounts! Both: **@thesexmyth.**)

DEVELOPING MATERIAL

One of the biggest inspirations to starting our conversation and generating material was the “Let’s Talk About The Sex Myth” workshop we ran with Rachel at our first rehearsal, the same workshop at Northeastern in 2015 that planted the first seeds for this project. Rachel conducted her workshop for us, sharing her story and talking through some of the key ideas in *The Sex Myth*, before leading us through an exercise designed to get us thinking about the rules and assumptions that govern our own perceptions of sexuality.

If you put on a production of this show, you will have the option to bring in Rachel to run the workshop for your own cast and crew, which I highly encourage. It was an exciting way to get the cast all on the same page and into the discussion about how their beliefs around sex might be socially constructed. But you can also replicate some elements of the workshop experience yourself.

One of the elements of Rachel’s workshop is an exercise where participants are asked to write down on six Post-it notes three things they have been told they should not be doing when it comes to sex (things that are treated as immoral, undesirable, uncool, unsexy, deviant, embarrassing etc.) and three things they have been told they should be doing (things that are treated as moral, desirable, cool, sexy, normal, aspirational, and so on.

Everyone sticks their notes to a board, with the “should” notes on one side and the “should not” notes on the other. These Post-it notes are then used as the basis for a discussion. What patterns do we observe in the things we’re told we should be doing? What patterns do we see when it comes to what we’re told we should not be doing? What acts, behaviors and identities fall under both categories? Which Post-it notes did your cast members find most interesting, or thought-provoking? Which notes most resonated with them on a personal level?

This Post-it exercise is a great way to jump in and start developing material. I asked the ensemble to split into groups of two and create a small sequence that reflects one note of their choice. With this sequence, you have something to start with, play with, and add text to at some other point if you want.

Monologues

The monologues are vulnerable so they require a lot of trust-building and time. A great first step is for the actors to look at the end of Rachel's book where there is a set of questions about the Sex Myth and to free write in response to one of them outside of rehearsal. You might want to write your own questions for ensemble members based on the material in the book.

Common themes often include overcompensating for our self-perceived sexual weaknesses, picking paths, contradictions in our sexual liberation (for example, how women are supposed to be pure and sexual and the same time), insecurities, the idea that who you have sex with reflects who you are, that people perceive you to be whatever you tell them you are, that the person/people you have sex with most know you much more intimately than others, the ways in which our sex lives are like a performance, how with awareness we can make choices that help us overcome the Sex Myth.

This could be a great starting point for drafting the monologues. There are many various routes to take with devising the piece ; for both writing and staging the monologues. With the licensing agreement, a full in-depth guide with some activities to build the play, including crafting the material, staging, and refining the material.

Staging/design

I chose to have the play performed in site-specific locations: a dorm common room, a lecture room, and our campus student center. I was creating a non-traditional theatre piece, so why not perform it in a non-traditional space? Furthermore, it was a great opportunity to bring theatre to people who might not otherwise seek it out. Bringing theatre to everyday spaces is a great way to expose new people to it, especially people who do not typically see theater.

However, choosing to host your performances in more traditional spaces can also be very effective. For one, it gives you more choices around lighting and set design.

With the location being flexible, so are the various elements of design. - set, costume, lighting, and props. It can be as scaled back, or as theatrical as the director envisions and the budget fits.



*Photography by Jody Christopherson
New York City Production, 2017*

TALKBACK/AUDIENCE INTERACTION

The Sex Myth is designed to engage conversation, so creating a space for audiences to think and respond to your show is essential.



Photography by Jody Christopherson New York City Production, 2017

The dramaturg for this production, Roberta Regeani, led our talkbacks. She writes:

“We wanted to understand what kind of emotional response the project was drawing from our audience. We quickly realized that smaller, more intimate spaces allowed for a much more engaged and participative audience. We also noticed that including the cast and crew in the conversation was extremely effective, especially when it came to the initial moments of the talkback. That encouraged the audience to jump in and share their own thoughts without so much reservation.”

It may be helpful to begin talkbacks with

explaining devised theatre, and why it is so important and useful for this particular project. Even with a diverse cast, not everyone's identity and experiences are portrayed. This is when it is crucial for the talkback to create a comfortable, welcoming environment while facilitating a genuine conversation to encourage audiences to share their thoughts, as well as speak up when they note something is missing.

If you want participatory audiences, you can employ the Post-It Workshop as the audience enters. At the end of the play, ask everyone to stick their notes up on the wall so they can see what other people have written. You can also include questions in the programs that the audience can contemplate to begin facilitating the talk-backs.

LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE OUTCOMES

Our talkbacks revealed that the show was very powerful for audiences to watch. Audience members found connections to *The Sex Myth* in their lives and began to share some of those connections with us. Some of the most common themes we heard in the talkbacks were how important it is to speak about sex honestly, and the freedom of realizing we are not alone in our experiences.

Student audiences were excited by its intimacy and shared that it resonated with them for that reason. They also enjoyed that it was the cast being themselves, telling their own stories. There was a personal connection, and the personal is very powerful.

One audience member, Lauren, told us later: “The stories that were shared were so honest and so necessary. I loved how diverse they were and they talked about the negative aspects [of sex] and overcoming them. Thank you for creating such a great piece of theatre.”

The play’s site-specific locations were also a factor that increased the power of the production, making it more intimate and accessible. Some people who happened to be walking by stopped to watch the performance. These were people who probably would not have gone to the theatre to see a show. The sit-specific location also took away some of the typical audience/actors barriers. There were no specific stages,



Northeastern University, rehearsal 2016

so sometimes, audiences ended up sitting quite close to the actors and becoming immersed with the performance. Audiences also asked the ensemble what they have learned, giving the cast an opportunity to show first-hand what happens when you talk about sex.

The ensemble also shared how they found closeness with each other because they could talk about sex more freely. They could share a part of themselves they had not been previously been allowed to.

Below are some thoughts from our cast members:

How did the play help you think more deeply about the issues in Rachel's book?

"This play has helped me realize how broad the sexuality actually is. It has made me realize that trying to define sex and its purpose is impossible as every single person has a unique sex life."

-Babacar

"Creating the show also gave us a chance to really dive more deeply into the issues in the book, adding in all of our own unique perspectives and examining them from every angle."

- Helena

"It was really interesting to see what issues came up in all our stories and how that carried across gender, sexuality, race, age, and even nationality. Telling your own story forces you to confront some deeply held ideas about what sex means in your life."

- Monica

How did the play change the way you thought about sex?

"I was raised to think of sex as something to achieve, but it's more something to experience, and whatever that experience means to me is completely fine. I also learned how important it is to speak with the person I may be having sex with and to exercise compassion and attentiveness."

-Liam

"The major thing I took away from the play is that you're never alone. So many of us had similar experiences and so many audience members said they also related to things we brought up."

-Helena

"I was able to understand myself so much better and work on accepting how my own relationship to sex might be different than other people's. Mostly, this project showed me that everyone has a different relationship with the Sex Myth, everybody has a different story, and it is not my place to question or judge that."

-Kim

"Being in this play really made me realize that I wasn't alone in going through struggles of what sex means, how it works, and how it defines my relationship with those around me. Even though all of our struggles are different, I feel like it always comes back to what sex says about us as people and the role it plays in our identity. Because I've struggled with labeling my sexual orientation, this has always been a really important topic to me, so it was really interesting to see how this came up in different forms in other people's experiences. I guess ultimately I learned that no one has a perfect sex life and we're all just trying to figure things out as we go along and that's okay."

- Monica

Working With Different Communities

Though I set my version of this play in a college environment, there are many other age demographics, communities, and settings that this project can benefit as well: including high schools, activist groups and not-for-profits, community and professional theatre groups, and religious institutions.

The issues in *The Sex Myth*—and the social and cultural regulation of our sexual beliefs and experiences more generally—do not only impact college students. And taking the conversations this show elicits outside a college environment is likely to benefit everyone involved as much as it benefits audiences and performers on campus.

Most of the processes laid out in this playbook can be easily replicated for other kinds of casts and communities. If there is an element of the process that doesn't work for your community or ensemble, feel free to adapt it to something that does work for your group. The beauty of a devised theatre performance like this one is that it is adaptable. There is no single set script or process that must be followed.

If you decide to produce this show in a high school or other setting involving minors, you will need to use consent forms and have more of a dialogue between parents, teachers, and administration. I would still recommend a student directs the process so that the students feel comfortable sharing information from their lives in the monologues.



Photography by Jody Christopherson New York Production, 2017

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