

Blood Babe

AN ELECTRIC HUG
BY MEG FOLEY



SHOW GUIDE

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CULTURAL DRAMATURGY AND THE EARLY MAPPING OF MEG FOLEY'S *BLOOD BABY*

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HOW IT STARTED

Blood Baby is conceived and directed by choreographer and performer Meg Foley, and centers her experience as a queer gestational parent. Playwright Sylvan Oswald and I became Meg's core collaborators for over two years, and dove into the creation of *Blood Baby* during its initial research and development period, from early 2020 to mid 2022.

From the beginning of my being project dramaturg and advisor, I found it crucial, given *Blood Baby*'s multiple components (*Carpet Womb*, *Communion*, *Touch Library*, and *Primordial*, along with surrounding modules like *Queer Parent Convenings* and a written Creation Story), to track the foundational elements and intersections among Meg's primary investigations.

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, the three of us—Meg, Sylvan and I—met virtually for intensive exploratory research. During these daylong sessions, we shared personal values and artistic practices. At the time, I had started integrating consent-based protocols from intimacy coordination in theater into my practice, and taught the team about how to implement safety structures and create trauma-informed support systems for a performance. I also pulled from somatic attachment therapy theory to round out rituals around building safer spaces. I was, and am still, highly influenced by how Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis designs radical hospitality for their audiences.

QUEER OF CENTER

There was an intimacy to our trio's initial research exchanges, and we built language to support that interdependency within *Blood Baby*'s structures and its future placement in community. As a person who had never given birth and wasn't raising a child, I took my additional project role as co-facilitator for the newly birthed *Queer Parent Convenings* (QPC) as a critical learning opportunity to educate myself around the inadequacies of the medical field and the institutional shortfalls when accompanying queer family creation in dominant culture.

I felt responsible for holding on tightly, and with all my heart, to the stories shared by the participating QPC parents—not the personal details, but the cautionary tales and warnings—to not perpetuate conventions that uphold heteronormative binaries or 'other' our intended *Blood Baby* audiences. As a preview audience of sorts, the QPC cohort was more than an artful support group. Their participation, especially during the guided movement improvisations facilitated by Meg, provided immediate feedback regarding how their bodies responded to prompts. This feedback laid the groundwork for the prompts in *Touch Library*.

Alongside supporting Meg fulfilling her artistic objectives for the project, and as my dramaturgical role extended past the internal world of *Blood Baby*, I dedicated myself to the critically important question of

how to do no (or as little as possible) harm when inviting queer families in to participate and become our guests of honor. Given the traumas that occur when expectant parents interface with medical professionals and institutional hierarchy, we had the opportunity to offer and model a bounded artful refuge and the aspiration of embodied reparations.

As the project's universe emerged, I tracked the topics embedded in *Blood Baby* (i.e. geology, gestation, queer family constellations, sex) as we took creative leaps and the boundaries between disciplines—dance and movement, text, performance art, moving image, site-responsive installation art, immersive social practice—further blurred. I also tracked the strategies and tactics of each collaborator, Sylvan or Meg, and started to hold space for our intended audience to show up inside these anticipated *Blood Baby* experiences.

Our project mapping imagined us, the core team of three, as our initial audience as we tested out the inner environments for *Blood Baby* within the emergent goals. Eventually the circle would expand to the project hosts (i.e. programmers, commissioners, presenters, and community partners) as the next ring of audience engagement and community involvement. Finally, the circle incorporated queer families before involving general publics, who overlapped and intersected with the creative team, performing artists, and venue visitor services (i.e. front

of house) staff. The hope was that once the *Blood Baby* world was established, many would be fluent within that universe as newcomers joined in.

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CARE DOULA

In my role, I began to expand what I thought a “typical” dramaturgical purview could be—having never done it before—and became the steward of the internal culture and value system of the project, holding guiding principles as aesthetic frameworks identified collectively from the research period. I imagined how to apply responsibility measures as the individual components of *Blood Baby* fleshed out.

One consideration was whether offering trigger warnings in advance to audience members would be supportive, since descriptions of explicit content can be soothing to some and activating for others. Due to the festival-like arrangement of the individual components (i.e. *Communion*, *Carpet Womb*, etc.) that would eventually make up the *Blood Baby* experience, would there be opportunity for mutual aid or after-care, or could we create a type of pre-care and frontload the invitation to attend and gently participate through instructions and transparency?

Beyond my early purpose in creating a comprehensive inventory of themes, concerns, and ambitions within the work, eventually my work focused on mapping out how every guest would enter the universe of *Blood Baby* and engage with the artwork directly. As part of a canon

of queer performance world building, we gave ourselves permission to reorient audience behaviors to our evolving logic and recon with societally determined pathways of expected conduct. During exploratory conversations, we kept theoretically testing and stretching the forms from the inside out to learn where the edges allowed for permeability, additional care, and dissolution of inherited oppressive habits.

MAKING SPACE

I believed in the guiding principle, and attempt, to do no harm, and that we should shape the technical planning prior to the performances, invite local community involvement leading up to the residencies, and consider how the project eventually exits a community. We were hopeful, and I was determined to leave room and resources for more queer art experiences to fill the space left by our departures.

I hypothesized that the muscle memory developed by our hosts at various sites, through our engagement and technical requirements, would continue to signal to queer families that you are safe here, we have been waiting for you, we missed you, and you matter here. Permission to just be. What contextual introductory materials are required to provide a foundation for individual agency? Can explicit structures hold the perimeters of engagement and accessibility so no situation is rigid and predetermined, yet with no unpleasant surprises or disappointments? Our language always had to be in service of reassurance to take up space and recede as needed. Our language needed to name active values to establish trust in behavioral conventions towards self-governance according to queer aesthetics and communities of mutual aid.

Our discussions acknowl-

edged that care didn't remove discomfort. As the core team, we were planning to hold space for growth-edge experiences for individual audience members. Sylvan, Meg, and I had to accommodate various participation levels and exit strategies allowing for self-care and personal regulation. Accessibility was shaping the aesthetics of how the project would be required to be hosted.

BEYOND LIP SERVICE

We built language for our future hosts to represent the artwork. For example, when *Communion* was described as “guided choreography of sensation through text” versus *Touch Library*, “unguided choreography of sensation through touch,” I would hold those taglines to the highest of standards. More than just communicating, instructing, and advancing expectations, these short invitations had to illustrate the mechanics and goals of the components making up *Blood Baby*. They needed to sustain and attract attention, create comfort, sparkle with prismatic possibilities, and be a resource throughout the lived experience.

There are so many ways to signal queerness and we held onto what made this world thoroughly queer as the two-year development period unfolded. The definition of life in geological terms—offered to us while interviewing geologists—created possibility for unknowing, reimagining, and queering our collective story. Geology was a central tenet of the project from the very beginning and gave us structure to lean on while forming the queer ancestral lineage for the project.

Text sourced from these interviews and developed by Sylvan for *Communion*, such as queerness being “as natural as rocks” and that it is “common to be rare,” gave us permissive tools for shining out loud and proud. We could tie these

concepts back to exchanges during the first QPC, when a participating parent shared: "kids bring me into magical spaces" just as we inherited the "queer history of creating magical spaces."

FORMATIONS

Blood Baby was growing, just as an organism would, and with it, we noticed how each of the iterations more succinctly co-existed together. We could literally feel the heat through symbiosis as thematic elements reinforced one another, once disparate, now united. Moreover, the edges seamlessly blurred into one another, easily pulling from geology (i.e. shorter bond, longer bond, collision of plates, cleavage plate, flow of materials aka riology). Mentions of contaminants now paralleled queerness. As a collaborator, I did not need to fully understand the science to find and feel pleasure and joy through the ideas geologists 'played' with that now deeply informed *Blood Baby*.

In my role, I felt the world of *Blood Baby* had to be mapped out responsibly to create cohesion and strategies for setting up the environments, and later to invite our audience members and invited guests. We also mapped to understand each aspect of the project's values and measure them appropriately, so that we could determine if they were doing the job they set out to do. Immersed in the *Blood Baby* world, I became physically sensitized to what was naturally arising in the work. I tried to anticipate reactions, against what dominant culture and habits instill, and fortify the work structurally so our intended values could stay integrous and sharp within our protected environment.

Writing it all out now makes me wonder if I seem naive and unrealistic, but that isn't the case. I believe in the deep energetic resonance of this work, and its power and potential to establish the conditions for our ancestral belonging amongst our rock kin.

