

## EXPLORING THE LANDSCAPE OF RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE: RESEARCHER, PLAYWRIGHT, EDUCATOR

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### INTRODUCTION

Like some other contemporary proponents in the field of *research-based theatre* (Belliveau and Lea, 2016) I tend to use the following terms interchangeably whilst acknowledging that they have their own particular meanings and nuances: *performed research* (Sajnani, Sallis and Salvatore, 2018, in-press), *ethnodrama* (Saldaña, 2005) and *ethnographic performance* (Wellin, 1996). A common thread which links all of these terms is that they refer to a process whereby research data and research report findings are transformed into a dramatic text and presented as performance.

With its postmodern performance aesthetic research-based theatre can require audiences to both interpret and interact with the work; the performance is a dialogic event, that is the audience becomes a part of the performance, in one way or another. In a Boalian (1979) sense, audience members can be invited to not merely observe a performance but critique it as well and may even be drawn into the action of stage.

With experience as a drama educator, ethnographer and as a theatre industry creative, I am keen to explore the potential of performed research as a form with which to share my qualitative/ethnographic research findings. To date most of my research-based performance pieces have featured teachers (pre-service and in-service) and students as research participants and subsequently they have become the characters in my plays and the primary or initial audience for the subsequent performance.

### KEYWORDS

*Research, drama, theatre, performance, performance-based theatre.*

### WHY WRITE RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE?

I concur with Janesick who, almost twenty years ago, asserted that in the field of education, research is often been reported 'without passion or imagination' and so it is 'often forgotten as soon as it is reported' (Janesick, 2000, p. 397). Sadly, I have found that for the most part her words still resonate today. However, there is no doubt that some researchers in the field of education are looking towards more dynamic and interactive ways to present their findings. Encouragingly, the flexibility offered by contemporary ethnographic research has encouraged some researchers to be innovative in the planning and execution of their methodology (Silverman, 2010). As leading ethnodramatist Johnny Saldaña asserts, 'ethnodrama' is one of a number of written forms ethnographers can choose to 'represent a study of people and their culture' (2005, p. 2) especially when the aim is to share findings with their research participants in a form which may be more accessible for them.

Writer of research-based theatre, Kate Donelan asserts that the goals of contemporary ethnography, with its emphasis on embodied engagement in human events in order to gain insights into the lived experiences of participants including oneself, complement the central aims of drama education (2002,

p. 43). However, I contend that this can apply to theatre as well. For my part I have found that research-based theatre is a dynamic method of sharing my findings with the original research participants; research project participants, especially students in schools, may not be accustomed to, or wish to, engage with journal articles or other forms of conventional academic reportage. Research-based theatre can be a highly effective way to convey research findings to teachers and students in schools. As Goldstein asserts, performed research plays have the potential to 'engage teachers in critical analysis and practice' (2001, p. 296).

In mounting his case for the recognition of practice-led research, Haseman reiterates Denzin and Lincoln's (2003) call for the performance turn in qualitative research (Haseman, 2006). When I am writing a research-based theatre piece, like some other writers in this field of endeavour, I refer to myself as being an 'ethnodramatist'. According to Anderson, a distinguishing feature of the work of ethnodramatists (that is a researcher-playwright) is that they look to performance 'rather than paper presentations and publishing as the stage for their research' (2007, p. 82). Informed by the work of Turner & Turner (1997) and Schechner (2006) as an ethnodramatist I appreciate that life can be viewed as a performance and so a dramatic text can be a highly appropriate form in which to retell the real-life stories.

As an ethnodramatist I see it as my task to create a text that gives voice to the participants in the research setting using the conventions of dramatic form to retell their lived experiences. However, like the research on which it is based, a piece of research-based theatre should be viewed cautiously if it is evident that the main purpose of the play is to merely advocate or to promulgate a particular world view. As some critics of research-based theatre rightly caution, this form of reportage should not be just a chance to advocate on behalf of the participants a researcher has come to know – presenting them as the heroes, victims or the oppressed in their culture and downplaying their negative or more contradictory characteristics. This can be potentially all the more problematic in ethnodramas which may be borne of a 'desire to make things better for teachers and learners' (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 19). As ethnodramatist Jim Mienczakowski, rightly says, if emancipation is an aim of an ethnographic performance then the ethnodramatist needs to question whether or not their research participants *need* emancipating and, if so, from *what* (1997).

## AUDIENCE – THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT

A key consideration when writing a research-based theatre piece is who does the ethnodramatist envisage will view it. With a conventional play or performance text, the playwright or deviser assumes that the play will be viewed by a general public audience, whereas the writer of an ethnodrama often has a *particular* intended audience in mind and fashions the play with that audience in mind. For example, as I have found with my own ethnodramas, it is possible for a single audience to be comprised of both members of the original participant group as well as other stakeholders and members of their community. When I present my research-based theatre piece to an audience I like to find an opportunity to explain the origins of the play to them and to give them a chance to ask questions and to comment on what they have seen. Scrutineers of this genre argue that when selecting material for inclusion in an ethnographic performance, ethnodramatists have not always paid due consideration to *whose truth* it is that they are representing (Ackroyd and O'Toole, 2010) and that they should make the context of their work more 'explicit for an audience' (Nicholson, 1999, p. 101). With many ethnodramatic plays it is not uncommon for the performance to be preceded by an exegesis, explaining the research process or a post-performance question and answer session with the audience. Some plays, for example *Alice Hoy is Not a Building*, embed depictions of the research

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process into the play itself (Bird, Donelan, Sinclair, Wales, 2010). I have found that it is also important for the writer and the production team staging an ethnodramatic play to make it clear to the audience what their role is to be; is the audience being asked to sit back and watch the play in a detached manner, or is the performance to be more of an interactive or immersive experience, and if so, how will the audience be involved?

## ARTISTIC CHOICES

One of the challenges ethnodramatists face when writing a research-based theatre piece is to aim for a performance which is not only informative but also an artistically satisfying and illuminating experience for all members of the audience. This is even more so for contemporary ethnodramatists because increasingly there is a call for higher aesthetic values in research-based theatre. As Anderson asserts, if ethnodramas are to succeed as a research method that can powerfully connect with audiences, ethnodramatists 'must take account of the aesthetic demands of theatre' (2007, p. 89). Allied to this assertion is Sinclair's contention that the 'aesthetic outcomes [of an ethnodramatic play] cannot be achieved without artistry' (Sinclair, 2006, p. 42).

Many of those who have documented research-based theatre, have called for more artistry in their writing and performance. A criticism sometimes levelled at ethnodramatists, especially those without a performing arts background, is that their plays may lack an aesthetic vision or artistic dexterity when it comes to the use of dialogue, direction or stagecraft. For instance, some ethnodramatic scripts tend to be little more than the staging (or reading aloud) of an interview transcript and such they can be artistically and aesthetically bereft. Conversely, other plays may be so abstract in style and/or intent that audience members find it hard to connect with the content; the meaning of the play gets lost in the aesthetic qualities of its staging.

## TRIPARTITE PROCESSES

When creating my research-based theatre I work in a tripartite manner as a dramatist, researcher and [drama/theatre] educator. The roles can often become blurred and worse, at times one role can unnecessarily dominate and suppress the others. Playwright and drama educator Penny Bundy also highlight this dilemma when she discusses some of the challenges and tensions that may exist for a researcher who is working in the dual roles of an educational ethnographer and a playwright (Bundy, 2005). Significantly, she questions whether the quality of the aesthetic output suffers when a researcher *simultaneously* works as a playwright. Similar to Bundy's views, at times, as an artist, ethnodramatists may feel that the materials they are working with (that is, research data and findings) may limit their artistic freedom. This can be especially so, if like me, an ethnodramatist tends to fashion dialogue *quoted directly* from research data. In my ethnodramatic work I tend to engage in a process of highly selective dramaturgy – drawing exclusively from the raw material that I have from my research notes, interview transcripts and so on. I concur with Saldaña (1998; 2005; 2008) who stresses that as an ethnodramatist he tends to quote verbatim from the data because this is an effective method for ensuring that, from a **researcher's** standpoint the perspectives of the participants are respected. Similarly, Mienczakowski and Morgan claim that the ethnodramatic process should 'incorporate as much verbatim narrative as possible' (Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001, p. 220). However, like them I too assert that a slavish adherence to verbatim textual material can result in a potentially boring and stultifying dramatic text.

When writing and staging my research-based theatre, as an **artist** I am aware of how I not only need to concentrate on the content of the play but on my aesthetic choices as well. I am often reminded of the advice other ethnodramatists provide about how to write a play that (hopefully) will succeed as a piece of theatre as well as a piece of research reportage. For example, Saldaña asserts that when watching a piece of 'ethnotheatre', the audience may become 'bored' unless the production offers 'visual variety' and that it is best to avoid 'lengthy monologues' instead interweaving 'the participants' voices frequently for variety' (1998, p. 186). He adds that if an ethnographic performance 'consists of merely people talking, then why bother using the visual medium ...' (Saldaña, 2005, p. 27).

As an ethnodramatist with continued experience as an **educator** I have found that my education background as a drama/theatre teacher has informed my work. Significantly, at times the **teacher** in me has questioned some of the decisions I have made as an **artist** when writing a research-based theatre piece based on my work as a **researcher**. To quote from Saldaña, sometimes I have included some 'juicy stuff' (1998) in an early draft of a play about the teacher and/or student research participants. In other words, I have included an incident that will spark the audience's interest because it reveals something sensational or astounding about the characters or their situation. Dwight Conquergood, himself an ethnodramatist, cautions that the aim of an ethnodrama should not be to 'sensationalise'. He sees this as 'tantamount to appropriation' (2003, p. 403-405). The dilemma of many ethnodramatists, myself included, is perhaps best expressed by Saldaña:

On the one hand, I am legally and morally bound as a researcher to protect the participants and respect their wishes for how they are represented. On the other hand, I am concerned as a playwright and director with telling and staging an engaging story for an audience (1998, p. 192).

As both an educator and a researcher I have been troubled by my decision to include 'juicy' content but as an artist I know that I have included it because I am sure it will not only appeal to the audience but raise some interesting talking points regarding the themes of the play. In such instances the basis of my concern stems from the 'juicy stuff' not necessarily being indicative of what usually took place in the research setting or how the characters typically behaved. For this reason, its inclusion may not only be unethical but also may have lasting negative repercussions for the teacher/student participants long after the play has been and gone.

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## IT'S A MATTER OF STYLE

Whilst I concur with Saldaña (2005) that there is more to a performance than just speaking words. In my own work I have found that audience members can find watching or listening to a *monologue* to be a very satisfying experience especially when the character shares a moment of their life in some depth. Monologues after all, have been a staple of theatre since (at least when) the first actor walked on to the stage in ancient Greece.; the English language word 'monologue' comes from the ancient Greek term to 'speak alone'.

According to Richardson, when conducting a writing project such as a piece of performed research, the writer should see beyond their own 'naturalisms of style and attitude' and that '*different forms of writing are appropriate for different audiences and different occasions*' (2003, p. 384-385). Whilst I concur with the intent behind Richardson's assertion here, I have found that monologues that are *more* naturalistic in style tend to be effective with a *range* of audience types. This may be because due to the naturalistic style, the context of material is more self-evident than it might be in a more abstract piece of work. Subsequently, less explanation is required around the performance of the text – naturalistic dialogue tends to stand on its own two feet. Given that, in recent times, I have often

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performed my ethnodramatic monologues in university classes and at conferences I have found that it is often easier for audiences to follow a naturalistic text. This has been particularly so when the audience members have very little experience of theatre as a medium.

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## ANALYSIS AND CREATION OF PERFORMANCE TEXT

Like many writers of performed research plays, I contend that my creative and artistic processes parallel the analysis that *any* qualitative researcher applies to their work. Similarly, for Conrad the process of devising a performed research play is one of ‘analysis and interpretation’ (2002, p. 76-77). This view is epitomised by Donmoyer and Yennie-Donmoyer: ‘the script construction process is not appreciably different from the data collection and analysis process employed in traditional forms of qualitative research’ (2008, p. 214). As Saldaña asserts, ‘dialogue is the playwright’s way of showing character interaction and interplay, terms found regularly in qualitative research literature’ (2005, p. 25). However, whereas the *reader* of a research report or journal article is in a position to judge the veracity of a research process and the findings, with performed-research it is often the theatre *audience* who makes this assessment. According to Saldaña, research-based theatre should not be judged on the printed script alone, but on the ways in which the audience responds to the text when it is *performed*. For him the ‘true test’ and the ‘ultimate merit and success of a play are constructed by the audience in attendance – the final arbiters of a play and its production’ (2008, p. 204-205).

When writing my ethnodramatic texts I find an effective way of portraying my research participants to the audience is to adopt aspects of the participant’s spoken delivery of language and to incorporate catchphrases they use. As a bridge between the initial data analysis and the writing of the ethnodramatic script I often apply ‘in-vivo coding’ (Alston & Bowles, 1998). In-vivo codes:

come directly from the language of the people being studied and are usually vivid in imagery as well as being analytically useful. They are terms of descriptions which explain the basic problems or processes faced by the people being researched and can lead to associated theoretical codes (Alston & Bowles, 1998, p. 200).

Paraphrasing Saldaña, this assists me to determine particular passages from transcripts and field notes which could form part of the script (2005, p. 15-16). I find that the in-vivo codes imply behaviours of the participants and/or added insights into the contexts in which the research was conducted. From the standpoint of the ethnographer it enables me to further document and analyse the culturally-constructed vernacular of my participants. I also find that in-vivo codes reveal potential key words and turns of phrase which I can focus on when developing the dialogue for my play.

To illustrate this, I share below a monologue I wrote a few years back based on a character I called ‘Greg’, a generalist primary teacher who goes to a professional development session run by drama teachers. The research from which this monologue is derived, was a project I conducted for Drama Victoria, the Victorian drama educators’ association. Its main focus was to investigate the responses of primary school teachers to its professional learning program. In the associated research project, the language as used by the person on whom the character of ‘Greg’ is based, I found to be provocative, ironic and self-deprecating in its tone. In writing Greg’s monologue, I did my best to capture these aspects of his language. This is mostly conveyed via the stage directions which are intended to guide an actor as to the tone of voice to use when delivering the lines.

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GREG (PSEUDONYM) - A GENERALIST PRIMARY TEACHER IN A  
GOVERNMENT SCHOOL, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

*(Middle-aged. Strong Australian accent. Off the cuff) Well, I'm Greg. I'm a Grade 6 teacher and I'm hardly what you'd call a PD junkie. Whenever the boss says, "we have the opportunity to go to this or that in-service", I duck for cover. I'm sure this is not what you want to hear, but until now I've had no time for the Arts and I certainly didn't think it was something I could teach; I thought that's the kind of thing you get a specialist in for. I'll send the kids off to them for an hour while I do my marking.*

*(Casual tone) I'm at a government school. I think we're a pretty average school. We do some things well and others not so well. We're not really into the performing arts at my school. Sometimes we have a concert, which from my point of view seems to be just like "Australia's Got Talent". You know, trotting the kids out to sing and dance in front of their parents but there's no sense of art about it. In the seven years I've been here there has never once been talk of doing a school play for instance.*

*(Eyes lighting up) Now as for the Drama Victoria workshop well I have to tell you it's been a real eye-opener. I should have done this, years ago. I've never gone in much for PD in the past. I've sat in on those in-school PD sessions, which are pretty dry, and I can't wait to go home. My Principal was looking for staff to go on an in-service to do with Arts education because we are ramping it up here and I thought well, what's the worst that could happen? The school organised it and only closer to the time did I realise it was by the drama teachers group. I could have pulled out, but I thought, no, sometimes you have to go outside your comfort zone, so I went along.*

*(He becomes more animated) Funny, but I didn't even know the drama association existed before I went to the workshop. I suppose if I'd thought about it I would have realised that there must be one. Subjects like English and Maths and even History have one and we get information from them all the time especially on Literacy and Numeracy because they're government imperatives and so it is hard not to notice they exist. Before the workshop I was pretty sceptical about the value of the Arts but now I'm having a bit of a rethink.*

*(More serious in tone) The thing I most took away from the drama workshop was that I can use drama to teach other learning areas. I think a lot of teachers would be surprised you could do that. Before I went, I thought drama was like a fill-in activity. I didn't realise that you could use it to get kids more interested in Science, and History and subjects like that.*

*(Reflective and somewhat ill-at-ease) I can you tell you something now though ... I was very nervous when I arrived. A lot of people seemed to know each other, and they seemed extraverted. I felt like the odd one out. Then it dawned on me – Christ, they're going to get me to get off my chair and act something out. I guess I had two choices, get up on my feet or sit there, and I could tell straight away no one else was just going to sit there.*

*(As if reliving the experience) The good thing was that we did things in groups and we sort of planned things before we acted them out. I didn't know you did that in drama. I thought we would be put more on the spot. But the group I worked with made me feel at ease because someone said, "let's think what we can do" and we sort of brainstormed out loud and that broke the ice. And when we came to share with the others I felt like I wasn't on my own doing it. We were working as team, which was a novel experience for me.*

*(Takes on a more reflective tone) The presenters were very knowledgeable and what I most respected was that they were teachers too. They actually made me believe these things could work with our kids. You could take what they were teaching and adapt it. They weren't saying "this is the only way to do*

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it” or that you had to be as experienced as them to do it. I liked how they said things like, “when I did this with my kids it worked like this ...” or “you could adapt it for your class by doing it like this ...”’. It made it more convincing for me.

*(Dogmatic) But, it’s a shame more primary teachers don’t know about how you can use drama or about Drama Victoria. If teachers like me, who have been teaching for ages, don’t know much about drama then there must be scores of others who are the same. I think they need to stop preaching to the converted and get their message out more widely. They have got to target teachers like me who would never think of teaching the Arts with their class and show them that it is possible. They need to give people like me the confidence to do it. They need to show why the Arts are important. That was what this workshop did for me. It showed drama’s applications across the curriculum.*

*(A light-bulb moment for him) And another weird thing was that a couple of things that I’ve been doing for years I now discover are CALLED ‘Drama’. Like what Drama Victoria called ‘hot-seating’; I’ve been doing that in English for years, but I call it ‘interviews’ and I think of it as an English activity not drama. That was a bit of surprise and I told them so.*

*(Looking directly at the audience) Now, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’ve become a convert, it’s too early for that. But I can see the value of using drama sometimes in my classroom. I’ve taken a few of things from [the workshop] and tried them out and the kids are responding. It’s a bit of a weird experience but now at the end of the class some of the kids come up to me and say “hey Mr. Rogers, that was cool” or ‘Can we do that stuff more often?’. All this time I have been reluctant to do anything like this because I thought I couldn’t teach that way, the kids would hate it and I couldn’t see the educational relevance of teaching the arts. But now I am beginning to appreciate the potential of drama to feed into other learning areas. But I don’t think most primary teachers get that (Sallis, 2014, 2017)*

Since writing this script I have had a chance to perform it at national and international conferences attended by educators and teacher candidates from a range of disciplines. Here is a selection of typical responses to my performance of this research-based monologue.

*I found the ethnodrama you performed [to be] highly engaging and like (sic) I have certainly been on staff with a [teacher] like Greg.*

*As a drama teacher, I could see what you were trying to achieve by showing your findings as a script.*

*... even though Greg was an enjoyable character to watch, and I suspect an enjoyable one for you to perform, how you quoted directly from what the ‘real Greg’ said was informative and most illuminating.*

*What drama teacher doesn’t like a play to watch? ... It was a little didactic at times, but what was said undeniably was relatable [sic].*

*Greg’s monologue was really interesting, but I was left wanting more ... is the Drama Vic [sic] research report available for me to read?*

*Being a [primary] teacher candidate, your play reminded me of the importance of the arts in the lives of children. I will certainly take this into my teaching in the future.*

## CONCLUSION

Given the tripartite manner in which I approach my work as a writer of research-based theatre, it is significant that responses such as those above, comment on its origins in research, its educational significance and the artistry of the performance text. As I have found, when working in a tripartite manner when creating a piece of research-based theatre, it is important to ensure that all three aspects of my work, that is, researcher, playwright and educator, complement each other and help to ensure that the final outcome is indicative of solid research, is artistically/aesthetically satisfying, and is educationally sound.

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