Show Me the Workings: playwriting, data, ethics and artistry in research-based theatre

Peta Murray, Linden Wilkinson, Chris Summers, Zoe Hogan

Abstract

This article is a conversational reflection from four playwrights and researchers on the tensions and affordances inherent in artistry and scholarship in Research-based Theatre (RbT). Reflecting on their personal experiences as playwrights and researchers, the authors locate themselves within the RbT community of practice, discussing how their ethics of playwriting has developed over time, including the tension between the creative rush and representation, and navigating the ethics of collaboration and community engagement. The discussion also addresses the broader role of RbT, questioning whether playwrights in this context should prioritise fidelity to research data or to the artistic integrity of theatre.

Keywords

playwriting, arts-based methodologies, ethics, artistry, data, practice as research, Australian theatre history

Introduction

The 2nd Research-based Theatre (RbT) Symposium, hosted by the RbT Lab at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, ran February 12-15, 2024. On 13 February, a panel session chaired by Dr Chris Summers was held between Dr Peta Murray, Dr Linden Wilkinson and Dr Zoe Hogan. The panel was organised around themes of playwriting, data and ethics and their relationship (and the panellists') to RbT. Each of the panellists are playwrights inside, and outside, of academia and explored the tensions and affordances between artistry and scholarship.

Arts-based researchers have long used transcripts to deepen understanding of, and debate around, ethics and artistry (see Denzin & Giardina, 2016; Leavy, 2024; Pelias, 2018). This article is a transcript of that panel session, with the panellists' own

contributions edited for clarity (or to provide references to quoted works) by themselves. Audience questions have been deidentified and generalised, and thematic subheadings inserted to allow for flow.

Rather than creating a new piece of RbT, the authors intend for this article to offer an accurate transcription of a live panel *about* RbT, hopefully deepening future discussions for artists, researchers and practitioners across disciplines.

Transcript

On locating ourselves within the RbT community of practice

CHRIS: We might start by introducing ourselves and our positions within RbT. I've worked professionally as a playwright for more than a decade, and have been fortunate to receive commissions, grants and awards from mainstage theatre companies as well as community / youth theatres. While I have studied playwriting (Peta was my first playwriting tutor at the University of Melbourne in the late 2000s!), and worked as a playwright within university-led health research projects such as *Being Frank* (Summers, 2018), it was only with my PhD in Education (after having been a high school teacher) where I explicitly connected qualitative methodologies with playwriting in a formal academic sense. This is how I learnt about RbT, and where I became interested in navigating the tensions between what playwrights do, what researchers do, with / for whom, and in which contexts. I'm now fortunate to be part of a Research-based Theatre Lab at the University of Melbourne, and through this and successful fellowship applications, have been building connections with other Labs (e.g. University of British Columbia) to keep writing new plays, finding new ways of doing arts-based research, and expanding these conversations.

PETA: What I thought I'd do is talk about three very discrete phases of my life and practice. I've mutated from an educator into a playwright and then into something else which is where I'm sitting now. I thought it could be interesting to look at RbT through

those lenses—that a walk down memory lane might illustrate some of the changes that have happened in this sector.

My backstory begins with my training as a high school teacher. It's from there I went into a playwriting career. I had been working with drama students creating and kind of re-purposing texts because of the teaching environments I was in. (Notably at a public boys secondary high school in Sydney's inner west, where I introduced teenage boys to drag by reframing works by Molière in a queer and playful way—well before we talked about that sort of thing.)

I became a playwright in the late 80s, almost by accident. I had one mainstream play that lifted me forward, but to pursue that trajectory, I had to commit to going down "Commission Road". This was in the late 1980s-1990s, and what I am referring to here was, back then, known as the community arts sector. It is now known as socially-engaged practice, and also goes under many other names (see Lillie et al., 2024). Where that delivered me—as an emerging artist and early career playwright—was to offers to write commissioned plays for young adult audiences that were then served by Theatre in Education companies (TiE). I'm thinking here of companies like Toe Truck Theatre, Arena Theatre, Terrapin and others, who toured around in their vans, performing in school gyms and so on. It was great as it drew on my background as an English / History / Drama teacher. I was writing a lot for those companies; this became my bread-and-butter. For example, my play *Spitting Chips* (Murray, 1995) which picked up an AWGIE (Australian Writers' Guild award) and went on to become a set text in many New South Wales high schools. I was also receiving the occasional commission from community theatre companies–which seemed one step closer to 'the real theatre'.

So, my early life as a playwright was built on frequent such commissions. This may not mean much to anyone on the panel but Linden – it's an era thing – but I'm thinking of companies like Melbourne Workers' Theatre, Junction Theatre Company. A lot of them had links to the union movement, or they were connected to clear social issues or values, they had funding to make new work telling Australian stories. The commissions I received in that space back then were conducted in what I will call a naive and even an "ethics free" zone. I was young and ignorant. I would assess such invitations entirely on their interest to me, and not on the ethics of whether I should delve into them or not.

I'll give you an example, a play called *This Dying Business* (Murray, 1992). I was commissioned to write this play for an international congress of hospice and palliative care workers who were meeting in Adelaide. I look back on it now and recognise that what I undertook was akin to an embedded research process, where I was an observer-in-residence at a hospice in South Australia for some time, but I didn't have any of that kind of methodological language back then. I was permitted to become very close to the Pall [Palliative] Care team, and to people coming and going from the unit to visit patients, and to volunteers who came and went from peoples' homes. I immersed myself in this, and I talked to anyone who was willing to talk to me, and I read a lot of the key literature of the day. And then I turned this into a play.

Another one I'd like to talk to is a commission from Mainstreet Theatre which produced an "output" called *The Law of Large Numbers* (Murray, 2003) about women, poker machines and gambling. Mount Gambier had a huge problem with women and gambling, and the Artistic Director then, Terese Bell, thought that a play might illuminate this in some useful way. I approached this in much the same way—I wasn't quite undercover, but I would go and stay in the community and meet the gamblers, meet the social workers and the doctor, hang about in the clubs and venues where the problem was situated. I had no awareness of any ethical issues impacting this at all. The arrangements were contracted through a literary agent. There was never anything said about the consent of the participants. In my defence, what I will say about those works is that, as is often my way, I turned them into highly stylised, metaphorical works so it would be difficult—probably impossible—for you to track them back to their source materials.

So that was a very formative, early stage, and I can think of other works—including one I've since apologised to people for, but which I won't talk about this moment—that I now think of with regret. And if I was asked now, today, would I do a work like that, my answer would be no. Resolutely no.

Flash forward to the next phase of my career. I was now a sessional teacher at Melbourne University, but the playwriting work was drying up—the commissions were drying up. Linden and I shared a memory earlier about our links to PlayWorks—an organisation that had been championing women's theatre through the 1980s and 1990s.

Its funding was gone, it was closed down, and with that commissions for people like me disappeared. The whole culture had changed in terms of the privileging of Australian voices, the need to draw forward women's voices, diverse voices. John Howard [Prime Minister of Australia, 1996-2007] made sure that was all shut down. There was no work for me any longer, and I was angry about it. But I was determined. I wanted to continue to practise as I'd always seen playwriting as my vocation. I felt I had been called to something and saw theatre as a site for public philosophy. So, I commenced a Master of Arts in Playwriting through Queensland University of Technology. It was in this context that I was first exposed to the "ethics" word.

And through this I was led towards—trained towards—different ways of thinking about research.

Playwrights are natural researchers, I contend. We don't necessarily need to be trained. There is something about the way we engage with the world through our curiosity and bower-bird instincts—constantly collecting, curating, joining, making links between things—that mean I was a natural researcher by that point. But within the framework of an MA, my approach to research changed, and the rhetoric around it changed. I was thrown in at the deep end and it took me a lot of grappling to work out how to exist in that space and do what I wanted to do. For a while I felt like my hands were tied—after being so very free.

The work I allude to 'mid my metamorphosis' was a work of classical research, in as much as through what I planned to investigate—women, playwriting and the anti-musical—I was also looking for ways I might to continue to practise in forms that were resistant to co-opting by the mainstream. What I wrote, under the banner of Practice-as-Research (PaR) (Barrett and Bolt, 2019; Candy, 2019; Skains, 2018) was an exegesis with a playscript—a libretto—of a work called "Things that Fall Over: an anti-musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda" (Murray, 2011). I'm the only person who can recite the full name of that play, so it's referred to as TTFO.

This work was an epic piece that began from an impulse to investigate late-blooming artists. I started by researching Elizabeth Jolley, who began her literary career in her late 50s, and Rosalie Gascoigne, a visual artist who did the same. Both were emigrants to Australia, and there were many interesting parallels between them. I went down the

biopic docudrama road for a while, but it did not work. I couldn't backpedal fast enough. Then I went where I am usually more comfortable—towards the metaphorical, towards absurd and very inflated characters and tropes and situations—hoping I could make it work. That was the middle phase of my *rapprochement* with ethics.

The final phase is the one that delivered me to my current life and current academic role, which includes service on the ethics committee at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). This was through training to do a PhD. A PhD is cast as research training, so the creative outputs are all well and good, but it's the training that matters. I did my PhD at RMIT. I started in 2013, and I used that time and experience to move myself away from playwriting and towards play+riting. By conducting rites. Conducting ceremonies. Conducting rituals. My PhD extended my inquiry on the late blooming artists such as Jolley and Gascoigne, but I now looked towards the experience of the older artist. For that project, I applied for and got ethics approval, and interviewed colleagues of my own generation, women playwrights who were on the outer. I collected a lot of great rants from a lot of angry ex-playwrights, but I did nothing with those, until, once again the metaphorical imperatives of playwriting as I understand it asserted themselves in a creative rush, and something new was formed.

My dissertation draws together references to real people living as well as fanciful people as well as two alter-egos of my own. It's a crucible: you take data and melt it right down until it's not recognisable anymore, and then it asserts itself in some other form. This may include things that look like scripts but are script-like objects.

These days I am committed to a life as an early-career researcher in a late career body. I am on the ethics committee at RMIT because I still don't always *get* it. I'm there because it is a part of my education and because I really want to understand the dynamic, the interplay between the data and the output. I believe in practice-as-research, practice-based research, practice-led, RbT, but for me the relationship with ethics is often paradoxical. It can seem very patronising or full of complexities and nuances that are informed—tainted even—by a way of thinking that has come from health and medical research and has been moved over to our sector … where it does not quite fit.

ZOE: I thought I might talk about two examples from my own experience that connect to this idea of research. The first one is only something that, looking back, I now realise was a kind of RbT—and the other example is part of my PhD.

The first example happened while I was working on a play, or trying to shape a play, based on some of my experiences in Timor-Leste working in international development. As a playwright, I often struggle with plot, and in this case it wasn't really coming together. Then I watched a Four Corners report about Witness K—the report was a huge creative catalyst for me and from that point on, I knew what story I was trying to tell. In a nutshell, if you aren't familiar, in 2004 the Australian government bugged the Timorese government's offices in order to gain the upper hand in negotiations between Woodside (an oil and gas company) and the Timorese government, concerning oil and gas deposits in the Timor Sea. It's an amazing story that I thought, wow, maybe there's a way that I can figure out how to tell this in a play. And that led me down an informal research path of immersing myself in all of that information, and connecting with a group of activists, the Timorese expat community, the lawyers representing the Timorese government, and being the lucky recipient of their generosity of sitting down with me to talk about their experiences of working in Dili at that particular time. Really inviting me into their community. Ultimately, I think that was what got me over the line with finishing the play, which was eventually called *Greater Sunrise* (Hogan, 2018) —named after the oil and gas field—and seeing it through to production. I thought, you've all been so generous to me, I want to try and see this through. Looking back, I see there were elements of research even though the story on stage was a fictionalised version of what happened.

Then, fast forward a few years—I was working as a teaching artist at Sydney Theatre Company, often working alongside incredible teaching artists who were also experienced actors. As someone whose background is in playwriting rather than acting, I began wondering 'what do I bring to these spaces as a teaching artist?' So for me, the PhD was an opportunity to push my teaching artist practice to see if there was a way to bring in those playwriting skills in a more overt way.

My PhD research involved working with a group of women from a range of migrant and refugee backgrounds, who teach community (or heritage) languages to children in

their communities, usually in a volunteer capacity (Hogan, 2024). We worked on a process drama for two months based on the story of Penelope from the Odyssey. This was building on work that I was very familiar with as a teaching artist, using process-based drama with refugee and migrant communities. For the research, I wanted to write an ethnodrama based on the process drama workshops, that would be presented back to the participants, as a way of sharing some of the findings of the research with them and also other stakeholders.

However, when I got to the point of writing the script I encountered a contradiction at the heart of the research design. I had spent two months working with this group of women to foster this sense of agency and ownership over this story we had shaped through drama and improvisation. Then I thought, why, having done all that, would I go away and write a script—put my name on it—and move the authorship away from that group of people, and then bring actors into a space to put voice to this story? For that particular context, I thought—this doesn't feel right to me. So I still wrote a script, but my intention shifted to offer it as a gift, a way of 'thanking' this group of women for their generosity and for collaborating with me. I really felt indebted to them and that really shaped my process as a playwright in the way I was quite surprised by. The choices I made as I was writing the ethnodrama were different to the choices I would have made if it was a script for an external audience or a script for actors to read. I spent a lot of time reflecting on that process. I think playwrights tend to be quite sensitive individuals and think deeply about these things. It really put this idea of care and reciprocity and gift giving at the centre of the creative process. I'm still trying to articulate that.

LINDEN: Peta, I was thinking of you—and all those female playwrights—and the things that have happened to us. The things we have needed to do to support the choices we have made. So, in that very rocky period of the early 2000s and [Prime Minister] John Howard, I had written about three plays. Comedies. I come into this dialogue first as an actor. I started writing for television but even that industry was restructuring, and I had trouble finding my feet. I went back to university to get some teaching qualifications and there found total freedom. Which was completely unexpected. I didn't think I was, but because of the choices I had made, I discovered I was rigidly locked into formula. I had lost access to the common voice. When I went to university, I discovered there was

something called verbatim theatre, there was ethnography, perspective, and the freedom of research—that was extraordinary. I could choose what I wanted to write about because I found it compelling. It was the complete antithesis of what I had anticipated. In the edgy world of television, there was restriction, but here there was expansion. And this discovery coincided with some really fantastic verbatim plays like *Stuff Happens* (Hare, 2013) which totally blew me away with what you could do. Out of that, I devised my Masters play, a verbatim piece on the Glenbrook Rail Disaster (Wilkinson, 2008). This was a train accident that occurred on the 1st of December 1999 in the Blue Mountains, when a crowded commuter train went into the back of the Indian Pacific—a train that goes across Australia. In the words of one of the participants, a 50m train became 5cm at the point of collision. I advertised in the local newspaper for participants, visited the participants, collected their data and interwove it. I was so lucky that really extraordinary people came forward. Only seven, but they all had amazing stories about their time in that front carriage, when their commuter train just stopped and they were "that" far away from being killed. With the support of a local theatre group, we took the play for public play readings in the Blue Mountains about three times. The third time we went to a guest house. And I was warned there was a woman, who had come into the reading. I was told that she was "trouble".

Every one of my participants in the first carriage talked about a little boy who had been killed, and how he was dancing on the stairwell when the impact happened. He had a pink mohawk, he was six, and he was going to see his dad on the Coast. Everyone talked about this little boy; he became a link in people's narratives. And the troubled woman was his grandmother. She interrupted the reading, stormed out, accused me of preying upon people's tragedies. It was a terrible, terrible moment. The play went on. But I knew I had followed ethics exactly. She emailed my Supervisor and he asked me if I wanted to see the email. She had made it quite clear why she was angry and how I exploited people. When I read this, I thought two amazing thoughts, quite simultaneously. First, I've done something dreadful. Second, no-one owns stories. This is everyone else's story—I'm simply translating. I hadn't made anything up. I thought, this is the most wonderful form of communication—none of us owns story, story is infinite. It was so liberating after all those years of television, to realise the beauty of the spoken word and the complexity of

the audience's responses. So that was my first experience of verbatim or research-based theatre. And I thought it was wonderful. A really wonderful experience creatively, in terms of discipline, respect and discipline.

So out of that, I used the same methodology for my doctorate—*Today, We Are Alive* (Wilkinson, 2016). This is about the building of the Myall Creek Massacre memorial—the only Aboriginal massacre in Australia for which, in 1838, white perpetrators were sentenced and hanged. Other cases of murder have gone to court, but nothing has ever been done in terms of punishment. The memorial was completed in 2000 by the Memorial Committee, which was made up of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, working together. In 2003, the memorial was vandalised. Three words were crossed out: women, children and murder. I thought, this is going to be my story: vandalism, racism, the stain of colonisation. How can you come together after vandalism? But nobody cared, none of the participants. Everybody, particularly the non-Aboriginal people, still re-lived the massacre every time they talked about it. That was always the story. The massacre. Not the vandalism. So those are my stories about the research process and the power of truth in story-telling.

On developing an ethics of playwriting

CHRIS: We have heard about journeys of reckoning with the role and responsibility of what it means to be a playwright. Having different encounters with the real world, or ethics, or processes, that forced you to reconsider what you do. I'm interested in knowing more about: how have you now come to understand your ethical framework as a playwright? What is it that matters to you, in the ethics of your job, in your role as a playwright now and how did that develop?

PETA: Every play is a reckoning. I think it's an ethical reckoning. I think it's a formal reckoning, a structural reckoning. I'm someone who is fascinated with form—so for me it's a reckoning with form, and how it can do what I'm hoping to do with the content. So my answer—my glib answer—is it will vary from play to play. And you—we—I—will need

to revisit the question of ethics with every single work and within every kind of encounter that frames that work.

ZOE: Something I have become really interested in is the idea of asymmetrical reciprocity, which Young (1997) writes about. This sense of exchange that doesn't end with an ethnodrama reading or performance. Sometimes we're trained as writers to think the play is the ultimate thing, but it's not, it's just one chain in an ongoing series of links that connect people. That might sound a bit twee but it's also—I guess for me as a writer and a teaching artist—it does remind me that it is just one piece. Thinking about the relationships you have with the people you work with for years and years in the future, and also your practice as a playwright and wanting to be sustained (if not financially, because that's another issue!)—but sustained artistically, and we want to keep being curious and working on authentic projects, that idea of reciprocity is really interesting to me.

LINDEN: I guess I was thinking about how the play teaches you. It's a relationship on the page, so that's a really exciting idea. But I also think we're at a very exciting time, partly because of television being at its golden age, and we've got access to different means of distribution and therefore different ways of saying things. We can consider—is this idea working for theatre, or would screen be better for some of this? We can combine many media, acceptable in the one package, which is something that we've grown up through—we were in a box before, but we're actually not. Not now. That's a really exciting idea for experimentation of the form. But also, how do the media that we choose enhance the text and the content of the story? We're in a good place to be larger than life as playwrights.

On the tensions between creative rush and representation

CHRIS: Thinking about tensions between real stories and real people. Linden, you gave a really harrowing account of someone who felt personally implicated and that it was their right to control representation. Zoe and Peta, you talked about different examples where you had embedded yourself in contexts where you had access to particular people

who influenced the plays you ended up writing. There's always going to be lived aspects of research, but then there's going to be your creativity and creative translation. I wonder, for each of you, where have been the tensions of the creative rush—following the instinct, push into something fictionalised, or more metaphorical and representational—versus feeling a stronger reverence, "I must authentically show this for what it is"?

LINDEN: When you're asking that, I was thinking: where are the ones that are unfinished? Where are the ones you couldn't finish? You try to answer one thing, and it doesn't work, because the idea diminishes as you go on, instead of flowering. So, you know it's time to let go and move on.

ZOE: It also made me think about *Stuff Happens* [by David Hare]—

LINDEN: Loved it—

ZOE: About the events leading up to the Iraq war. He imagines conversations that happened behind closed doors as well as stuff that is on the record. And that definitely influenced how I wanted to write the play *Greater Sunrise* (Hogan, 2018) about Timor. But on reflection, I do wonder if the play may have been stronger had I situated it a bit more in the reality. I imagined a lot of what happened—and what actually happened is not public still—so there's a limit to what information is actually at your disposal. But yeah, I guess the experience of that work being produced and a lot of people—this was a few years ago, so before it went to the International Court of Justice—a lot of people had never heard about it because it was considered quite a niche story that was hard to get your head around. I could see that it sparked people's interest to go and find out more. It's not like I'd go back and write a different play, but if I was to go back, I might want to ground it a little more in the actual circumstances, even though that comes with its own set of difficulties.

PETA: I'm thinking about the continuum between *drama* at one end, with *docudrama* as a subsidiary of that, and *theatre* at the other end. I'm thinking about the Greek origins of

these words. Theatre is "the seeing place", a site where you can show a world and look into it. I don't need to *tell* you anything, you're invited, required, to simply look into it. To give it audience. At the other end of the continuum is *drama*, with its telling and its doing. For me, it's always about negotiating where I am on that continuum. I have stylistic and aesthetic leanings that mean I tend to stay at the *theatre* end, but I also understand that with certain kinds of stories come certain kinds of obligations that mean I must veer toward the other end.

Speaking (again) from a point of view of a member of my generation, when I started writing theatre one of my standard answers for why I wrote was that I was 'giving voice' to the untold stories—of women, mostly. It was a service thing. That was the angle I took on it. These days, it's not politically correct to be 'giving voice': there's a constant negotiation that has to happen in terms of one's rights to story, one's claims to story, or to storify, and to how one makes peace with oneself when a story is not one's own.
I'm not that interested so much in what the world says about it, but I am interested in the sort of thing that we are talking about here—and that dis-ease that can arise when you're working on something, and you think: *Oh my god, I thought I was doing this good thing, but now I'm concerned I'm actually doing something which is reinforcing stereotypes, or taking voices away, or hybridising voices because you've had to dull all of the nuance of a particular story.*

It's always going to vary from project to project. This is where I sit now with play+riting. I'm not only interested in outcomes. I'm interested in processes *towards* outcomes.

ZOE: Especially when for a playwright, the process of having a play produced can be incredibly fraught and even at times disappointing. Refocusing on process can be more joyful, because as playwrights, at least in mainstream "theatre", we don't often have so much agency in how something gets realised on stage.

On the ethics of collaborative processes and relationships with communities

CHRIS: I think you've raised a really interesting point how in many forms of theatre, the playwright does their job, and there's so many other forces that will influence the ultimate shape of a production. The playwright's voice is heard less and less as time goes on. But there's something interesting in research paradigms and the academy, and even in these ethical frameworks outside of universities in communities, where actually the playwright's role is more about relationships. Ongoing relationships with community, the authentic things that are built and developed: both plays and relationships.

On a playwright's obligation to data

CHRIS: What do you feel like, as playwrights, you ultimately owe the research that you've done and any data you've generated yourself or you've "found"? Thinking about interviews, fieldwork, conversation, first-person active primary research, but also the secondary ones—desk / internet-based research, documents. I think about some of my earlier processes. And the first commission I ever received was in response to a teenager shot dead by police in Northcote. He was fifteen and unarmed, he was tasered and then fatally shot. This case became a lightning rod of issues of police brutality, young people and disenfranchisement, race and mental health. I felt such a strong affinity to that case, and yet as an emerging playwright, felt powerless as to do anything other than fictionalise and remove myself from any research methodology other than researching newspaper articles. The theatre company who commissioned me asked if I wanted to talk to people, to reach out to family, and at the time—I said no—and I think if I'd done it at the time, I would've failed, and done a terrible job. Because I didn't know anywhere near enough about ethics or research! But I felt such a powerful connection to this unjust act, which then resulted in the play that I wrote, *Crossed* (Summers, 2012). It was funded by Creative Victoria, and presented at the National Play Festival, and is an important part of my emerging playwriting journey. It's an example of something based on real events, only researched through secondary media, but I never represented the actual shooting or the event—it was five intersecting stories, unique characters, who witnessed the event in the

later part of the play. That's how I used data back then, but I'd approach it very differently in the position I am in now. How do you feel about methods now, and where do you sit with your data?

On influences and the fostering of ethical methods

LINDEN: I guess my favourite thing is when you can start cutting. When the actor takes the poetry of silence. Delivers through the body. When nothing is said—all of that actor magic.

CHRIS: So, thinking about the primary research, which is real interviews and primary transcripts, for you—hearing the words out loud—allows for a creative process to happen?

LINDEN: I don't think I'd want to do anything without participants and actors. Otherwise, it would just be me. How dull is that?

ZOE: I was just thinking that something which really influenced me while I was writing the ethnodrama as part of my PhD—this quote from Dan Harris and Stacy Holman-Jones (2020), about "performed and performing in a cocoon of meaning" (p.326). The cocoon became a really rich metaphor for me because I just wanted to write something meaningful to this particular group, so that we could read it together on this one afternoon, knowing it may never happen again. And that's a beautiful cocoon of meaning. I was so happy to spend so much time and energy and thought on creating that ethnodrama, and I didn't do secondary research, because it was just about that cocoon in that place, in that moment.

PETA: What I'm hearing, and what I'd like to say is that rite+ing is about a synthesis of honouring, respect, reverence, *with*-ness-ing. And so, there are sacramental elements to it that will flavour my relationship with the data. But, to your primary question, I feel no obligation to the data, beyond an obligation to sit in it, to breathe it, to engage with it in

my porosity as a sensitive (I hope) person who is trying to transform or who intends to transform it into some other vocabulary. I feel no obligation to protect it or to protect the sources—in an ethical way—to that data. So, for me, it's very much about rites of passage—always—*with* the data, *through* the data, and then for the audience beyond that *in relationship to* the data.

On positionality and "authenticity" in representation

AUDIENCE: I'm really curious about a culture of authenticity of representation, whether that's in theatre or music or TV. I'm curious to know about your ethical tensions if any exist in relation to your own positionality when entering into these communities.

LINDEN: I think you have to be aware all the time. Because things change underneath you. In an interview, things might go off-track, which means you don't have access to any of it. You have to really take on board that what you have been told is something that person wants you to know. And that you haven't gotten too caught up in any kind of triggering moment. Constant vigilance and care in writing something. That is research.

PETA: When I started out, "positionality" wasn't a word. I didn't know what it was, and I certainly didn't know how to think about it. That's something that's a process of ongoing self-awareness and self-education. Going into these situations with an element of humility—not even just that—I remember back in the early days when I would choose to do a commission and my yardstick was: will this scare the hell out of me? If it did, if there was a sense of trespass, there was sense of somehow—I wouldn't have had the word—yet, but if my positionality was going to be challenged, then I was in!

These days, I think an invitational element is the most important thing. I would never go "I'd love to go and write a play about blah blah" and here I am! But if someone invites me to come and think about something and to think-through-making—which is what I believe we do—that is a different thing. I think finding everyone's position in that space will be an essential, non-negotiable part of the initial calibrations of and preparation for making that work.

ZOE: I guess the only thing I'd like to add—humility also came to mind—and this is more as a teaching artist than a playwright—I would only work in a context where participants already exist in community, and that community has existing and appropriate support, whether it's as part of a support organisation or network of some kind. So it's not that I've come in and created the group, and it is operating in a vacuum. I've been lucky to collaborate with teachers and counsellors and support staff in organisations, who are providing long-term support to participants. Because as theatre and drama practitioners we have to be really clear about what we are offering in that space and what we can't offer.

On what research-based theatre practitioners can offer

PETA: I will add one more thing—listening. I like to call myself a "public noticer." My job is to go in, listen hard, and notice stuff. I can go in and do that without having to assert my position or place or person. I'm there to witness and record, to notice what's going on and under.

LINDEN: I was also going to say, there has to be an element of trust. Trust in yourself, but also the situation that you have created. I was speaking specifically as I had a really bad falling out with one of my participants, which was my fault, and I couldn't afford to lose his testimony—everything was verbatim—it linked a whole lot of things together. He really wore the mantle of the major storyteller. Anyway, I really went into performance mode and was as happy as earnest as possible, and grateful. I made sure he was included in things and I had to depend on his relationship with the others. So, it's important to keep an eye on the quality of the relationship over time.

On tensions between art and research

AUDIENCE: We've been talking a lot about playwriting, researcher, ethics and tensions. I was wondering, playwriting is also about creating something that is a work of art—the tension between the research and the artistic outcome. You're looking for a nice arc,

moments of beauty, dramatic tension, complete and satisfying, is there—are there—tensions there, or does authenticity of working with data restrict what you can do?

PETA: I'm on a project where that tension is playing out. Between "here's the data"—and in a lot of ways the data for me is a giant yawn—and here is a theatrical rendering of the findings of that data—which I think is exciting. There's a lot of tension—it's not conflict—but we've been through any number of different strategies around making the creative output and depending on who is in the driver's seat, it goes from being really dull to being big and bold and artistic and creative and exciting and then it goes back to being—at least in my view—really dull. But so faithful to the data. And I don't have an answer. It's one of the problems of being an artist in the academy. You're there on these teams, you're honour bound to abide by the project, and if the project is dull—it's okay. But I loathe that stuff myself; I want to scream. I can't bear it. (Am I allowed to say this?) *THIS IS WHAT WE FOUND AND WE'RE GOING TELL YOU ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND AND HOW YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT THEM.* I can't bear it. For me, it ultimately gives rise to an artistic crisis—why do you need a theatre person in the room? Why not just print it out and give me a newsletter. Give me a sermon. I'll gladly take it in that form. But if you're saying this as theatre, then give me an aesthetic sense of performance. Give me the dynamic of an audience reacting with the work. It's a very fraught one.

On fidelity to data versus fidelity to art

CHRIS: You were talking about the fundamental elements of a play. You need character(s), story, structure, arcs. In terms of data, is it possible to do both? Is that what some great RbT looks like—it doesn't follow all conventions of playwriting or performance, but uses some successfully, and also foregrounds some concept(s) of 'data'? Maybe that's what we all wrestle with in this space?

PETA: One of us used the word *stakeholder* earlier. Who are they—these stake holders, and what stake do they hold and what do they want or expect from it? Are they expecting

to have what they think they know told back to them, in a palatable manner? Or are they expecting to be knocked off their seats by something they did not understand, thanks to something displayed in an unpalatable manner?

This is one of the problems of research and research-based theatre—you sometimes have one arm tied behind your back. You do have stakeholders and you are to deliver to that cohort. And that can be at the expense of the art, or the *artfulness*, of it.

On the ethics of creating dull theatre

AUDIENCE: In thinking about ethics, and artistry, is it unethical to create a dull piece of work?

PETA: The first question we need to ask always: does it *need* to be theatre? Does it *need* to be performed? And if it does, what does theatricalising it allowing us to do that the sermon or the prayer or newsletter does not? Only then, once we have answered that, can we determine what the piece of theatre needs to do.

On creative leadership in collaborative spaces

AUDIENCE: I've been thinking about that gate-keeper or stakeholder—sometimes a person, a voice in the room says "no we're not going this way". I wonder how we can use all the skills possible around the "hard no's". I think it needed to breathe in a different way. I think we all face those moments where we decide—am I the right person? Is this the right thing?

LINDEN: Isn't that where an ensemble comes into play? Isn't that part of what comes in rehearsal, a solid group united by a cause? It's like the grandmother and the train carriage—you can't have that. It's everyone's story, but someone says, "that's my story".

PETA: What interests me, and what has been very freeing for me, is the concept of research translation and using arts-based methods as forms of research translation. The

same data can be repurposed in a number of different ways, and so the *artifying* of that data is only one way.

On the surrendering of the text

AUDIENCE: I wonder, as playwrights, at what point you can or would like to give it over to others—or is there a desire to still want to be involved in that process of bringing it to the stage?

ZOE: I think if it's something that is in the research world, then I am much more unwilling to let it go. I feel like a lot of the ethics sits with me, almost in my body and with my person, at least with a lot of the work I have done in that space. Whereas if it's not in a research context, then I think I have become used to the idea that you 'hand it over' to other artists to interpret and bring to life.

CHRIS: Before I came into research, I was very much a "I write the play, and then I don't trust myself, so I'm going to give it over to directors and dramaturgs, take on all their notes, and hope someone produces it". Since I've been working in research, I've started seeing things a little differently. This play *Pedagogy* (Summers, 2016) we're about to see, I've directed it—and I've never directed before. And it's because, put in a research context, the play's personal resonance to me as a research object has taken on a new power and relevance. With a mainstage or general public audience, it's almost as if those people are transient and come and go. But when it's in a research world, it's part of an ongoing research community. I feel empowered by that.

On writing your way out of dull theatre

AUDIENCE: I have an ethical question of "dull theatre", especially in a research setting. What do you do once you think you've written "dull theatre"?

ZOE: It makes me think about the research-based theatre I've been most familiar with, and privileged to be in the audience for, I feel like it's more akin to being in a rehearsal room because I'm watching it in a different way. I'm not the same kind of audience member as I would be at a professional (whatever that means) production. I think that's actually what I'm drawn to and love about research-based theatre, that feeling that we're in a rehearsal room, rather than a theatre.

LINDEN: I think yes, because you're not putting demands on it—you're seeing what it serves. I was thinking when you asked that question, you need that circle of reliable friends. Who can help you look for opportunities you might've missed.

PETA: You may need to write another twelve drafts! And it doesn't mean what you've written is "dull", but you need to write out, through, towards.

Also, there's the metatheatricality of this stuff that we can turn to purpose—we can make the work, AND comment on the work within the work—and for some audiences that is very interesting. Even if the data is dull, sometimes the engineering of it, and the way we can display it—by turning theatre inside out—by revealing the rawness of it—I think if we can push through the artifice and turn the forms inside out and allow metatheatricality to do its bit. We can still save ourselves from the inevitable "dullness". It's the privileging of the dramaturgical, rather than the bells and whistles. I remember—it's like doing maths in school—show me the "workings".

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