

Collective Outsider Theatre Practice: Creating an Intercultural Hybrid Form of Practice-Based Conversation

[SCOTT WELSH](#)

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE and VICTORIA UNIVERSITY,
MELBOURNE

[ELNAZ SHESHGELANI](#)

[MARY-ROSE MCLAREN](#)

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a ten-year exploration of the self and social experience which fused together two disparate theatrical forms, Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, to create an intercultural hybrid performance medium. It harmonised and humanised two artists' practices, and liberated them. This study outlines both art forms and the collaborative work of Scott Welsh and Elnaz Sheshgelani (2009-2023). It describes their process of creating a cultural and performative hybrid form which opens up new ways of thinking about text, movement and performance. As an example of this

hybrid form, the authors draw upon an upcoming performance at La Mama (a Melbourne theatre) about the experiences of a stray pet cat, who spent two years on the street. Titled 'Moosh the Hobo Cat', the piece uses practices established through this collaborative artistic work. The authors then apply this form to their work as Higher Education teachers, and consider the pedagogical spaces that it opens up for students and teachers in university classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore hybridity in theatre as the practice of bringing together contrasting and complementary performative traditions from different parts of the world (Liu, 2013). Such hybridity, which also includes diverse social classes, race and abilities, and backgrounds, elicits discussion and reflection from those involved in the making and from those who are audience. Ultimately, the authors of this paper hope that this form of hybrid theatre might also provoke social change and create 'new futures', ones that transform the past and present (Spiers, 2014). This is an ideal that broadens theatre practice beyond traditional representation using actor, script and audience to communicate a story, into the space of an evolved 'conversation of forms.' Ideas are elicited, and evolve, through the changing and transformative nature of the practice itself. As performance, and as a pedagogical tool, the hybrid theatrical experience alters according to the influence of two distinct cultural practices embedded into the form the drama or performance takes. In the context of this interaction between form and understanding, the authors explore the potential for Persian Storytelling and Real-Life Fiction to offer new opportunities for education. We ask how this theatre of cultural hybridity might be applied in a meaningful way in tertiary learning contexts.

WHAT IS PERSIAN DRAMATIC STORYTELLING THEATRE?

Persian Dramatic Storytelling is an ancient art form from Persia, utilising Persian drama and fundamental elements of Theatre. An important component of Persian Dramatic storytelling is the body representing narrative, story, and words. That means the body must

become literate in the language of story-telling. Poetical archetypes and symbolic communication form the language of the body in dance, facial expressions and gestures. It is, therefore, a language of movement, comparable to Laban, with both emotive and political implications. Sheshgelani describes Persian Dramatic Storytelling as the development of a physical and visual vocabulary, characterised as 'dance-cription' (Sheshgelani & Naghshbandi, 2022), which culminates in the expression of an underlying social/political message (Sheshgelani, 2022). This process of development is triggered by shared experiences of the human condition, archetypes heard in the words, and understanding story through senses. In its ancient form, the functions of Persian Dramatic Storytelling is for the artist to travel and engage with communities, by telling their stories, using their native language/behavioural action in parts of the performer's narrative, and utilising their dance in the performative actions. Persian Dramatic storytelling has survived until recent times, although its original Persian art form has been damaged by Islamic states and beliefs.

WHAT IS REAL FICTION?

Real Fiction is a term used by Welsh (2016) to describe his evolving autoethnographic writing and theatre-making practice. It has similarities to Verbatim theatre, in that it employs the spoken words of real people, and therefore may be considered ethnographic, rather than autoethnographic. However, it also seeks to be explorative and emphasises documenting the experiences of the knowing creative self, through the direct voice of the observed social subject, and though not necessarily advocating on their behalf, this latter engagement may occur through creative practice (Welsh, 2016). It is concerned with characters and relationships, and it does not attempt to replicate the vocal qualities of the initial speaker—rather it lifts the speaker's words off the page and locates them into dramatic contexts. It is a nuanced performative response to conversations that occur in, and as a result of, experiential encounters. Welsh claims Real Fiction 'involves observing and recording voices from the author's experience of others.' An example of this in action is Welsh's rolling and evolving exploration of social experience through 'real fiction' stage representations, such as *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* which explores homelessness and social inequity, and *Barcode*, which explores

domestic violence and family trauma. Welsh also uses Real Fiction as a pedagogical tool working with Higher Education students. He suggests that, '(Real Fiction) can work in the lives of students to understand and express their social situation' (Welsh, 2017, p. 56).

THE CONVERSATION OF FORMS

Sheshgelani has explored and developed contemporary applications of Persian Dramatic storytelling in art-making, theatre-creation, education, and academic research, over the past 15 years. Through collaboration with Welsh a new theatre form has emerged. Many of these theatrical efforts have been unproduced and remain as studio works. Others have been presented as theatrical projects, such as *Tehran* (2013), *The Outcaste Weakly Poet* (Welsh, 2014) and the upcoming *Moosh the Hobo Cat*, at La Mama Theatre (Welsh and Sheshgelani, 2023). Welsh and Sheshgelani have tried and retried the bodily, symbolic, exaggerated physical language of Persian Dramatic Storytelling with present-day written text (usually poetry), portraying the urban experiences of 'outsider' voices. Thus, the ancient art form and its principles are applied to contemporary voices in present-day Australia. Such hybrid art forms work with making and remaking, revising, making, and remaking until eventually the result is understood bodily, emotionally and intellectually by makers of the form, performers, and audiences. In this conversation between Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, the body, and its physical location and restriction, becomes a medium for speaking images.

The application of the hybrid form is best understood, not through the monologues and dialogues contained within the script, but through the stage directions, where the dialogical engagement between the collaborators takes place. The directions are aspirational, a request, responded to by the application of the very particular style, with ancient origins, and are founded on previous engagements. What the movement in the work represents, therefore, is an intercultural conversation between Real Fiction and its representations of 21st century Australia, and Persian Dramatic Storytelling, and its centuries of heritage. Apparent here is connection and emotion driving the work, eros rather than logos, and yet the ideas with which Welsh and Sheshgelani are engaging in the development of this hybrid form are founded in current sociological and pedagogical discourse on issues

such as homelessness in Australia, and literacy through solidarity (Freire, 1972).

An example of a previous collaboration: extract from the outcaste weakly poet stage show

This description of a previous hybrid work, *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show*, helps to explain the interaction of the two forms of theatre, in the creation of something new. This piece based on Welsh's life and observations as a street poet, handing out his poetry in various urban and regional locations in Victoria and NSW, Australia. In 2014, the piece was performed in a small 'tour' that followed the path of Welsh's life as a street poet, beginning at La Mama Theatre in Carlton, heading to NSW and various locations in Sydney's inner-west, so that collaborators on the piece, including Sheshgelani, became embedded in the social and cultural surroundings of the work's genesis. This extract describes the final moments of a man who resided on society's fringe for his entire lifetime. The stage directions are italicized.

They put him on
The floor of
The public hospital
He was a casualty,
In war
On the underclass,
That's all.

Elnaz stands on stage as this is read, begins to look unsteady on her feet, as a deliberate action that expresses the situation, creating a narrative with her body that reflects the words I am reading. This responds directly to the words and, in this particular instance, the style of the movement and the style of the performance work together as a language.

Rolled around,
On the ground,
For once
He wants to be
Free to go to the toilet see.

Elnaz follows the words, lies on her back and spins around, her left hand reaching in the struggle to get free.

In this short extract, it is possible to see the ways in which the two forms are feeding off each other. The interaction between words, rhythm, form and ideas are found in the text and in the movement—and each is enriched by the other. It is this communication during the collaborative process that creates the hybrid form.

Moosh the Hobo Cat (2023)

The engagement between the two forms that is evident in *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* becomes a deep entanglement in Sheshgelani and Welsh's most recent collaboration, *Moosh the Hobo Cat* (2023). It is with Persian Dramatic Story-telling in Welsh's process that he writes his stage directions for *Moosh*, drawing on a knowledge established in previous collaborations. The epistemological dialogue contains within it a politics of the oppressed and a fear articulated in the movement. However, it is movement that belongs to a physical language that Welsh does not speak. His words constitute a half-finished conversation that requires the other to be complete.

Welsh writes: Music plays. Moosh enters. He comes to centre-stage, eating food. Runs one way and looks. Runs the other and looks. Panics, eats. Hyperventilating, panicked. Hears a noise, runs from his food.

Sheshgelani's process of planning and engineering the mechanics of the body in the performance, enhancing and responding to the words, so that the collaboration generates yet another artistic form in its process, is represented in the images in Figure 1:

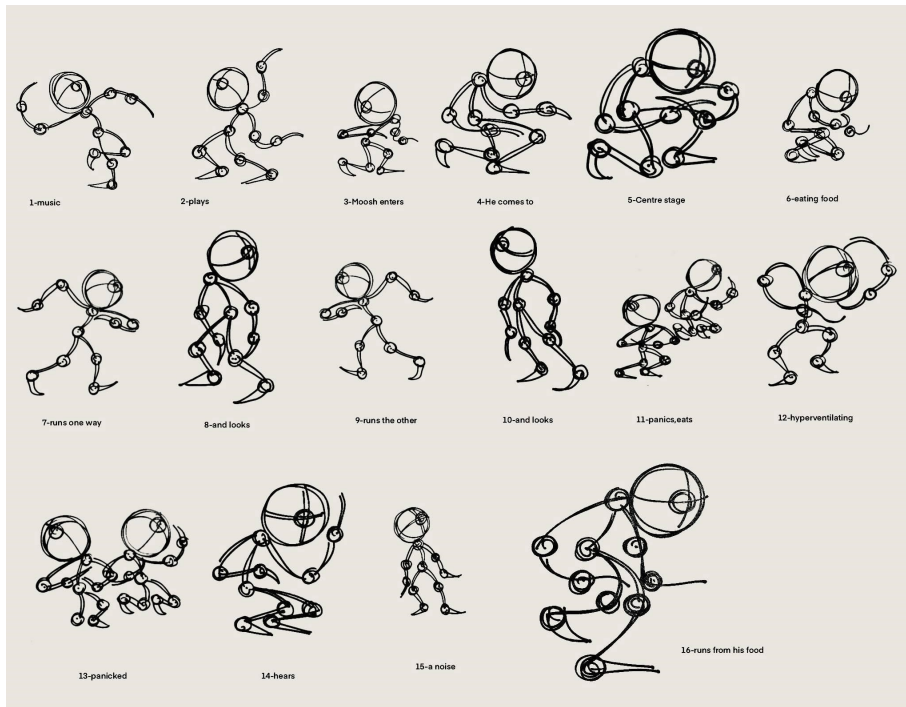


Figure 1: Sheshgelani's process of planning

The visual language represented here was developed by Sheshgelani, and is termed 'Adamaktion'. Adamak means 'little human' in Farci, and the idea of the little human as an existential being is applied in these detailed illustrations of the mechanics of movement, themselves a form of narrative that takes place in a visual communication between the creator of a piece and its performer/s. These designs represent an instructional utterance to be comprehended and then expressed in the actions of the body.

This entanglement of forms can be conceived as applied visual art used in the construction of a conversation, consisting of a physical response (Sheshgelani) to the written/verbal text (Welsh). Political and social narratives told by Welsh are represented in Sheshgelani's process here using concepts from her practice. Themes of homelessness, *helplessness*, despair and defiance permeate the illustrations, but all are depicted with an innocence reflecting the developing character of Moosh the cat.

A closer look at Moosh: Representing childhood trauma

The following scene from *Moosh* further elucidates the creation of the hybrid form.

(The lighting becomes ominous here. Gone [a cat] emerges from the small group of cats, this part is reminiscent of the musical 'Cats'. Music is kind of Tom Waitsish or Dylan's 'Signor...'-whatever the actual title of that is.)

Gone had been born a hobo and salvaged from the masses in the pit of hopelessness. He'd lived on the hard streets of Sydney, cannibalising the left-over cat meat, laced with cocaine and disguised as chicken, thrown out by the illegal brothel owners, who only had the food as a front for their depravity. Eventually, the people smuggler who owned the joint got busted and took it out on Gone, kicked him and left him half-dead, with damaged organs.

(Let's make some sculpturesque items for the above part)

Moosh and Gone became great mates.

(miming together)

They hunted together. *(a stance for this)* They fought other cats together. *(A nasty launch at the audience)* And Gone taught Moosh how to live or survive *(miming little learning moment, like carving a rat with one's claw)*.

(Then it stops and Gone moves into the shadows and falls on the ground-leaving Moosh alone in a spotlight) One day, Moosh noticed Gone didn't want to play anymore. *(lights on Gone)* He didn't want to hunt, and he didn't even want to come out from the room where he slept.

It turned out Gone was very sick, and eventually Gone died. This made Moosh very sad.

Considering this form of hybrid dramatic story telling as a forum for the exploration of ideas, we see here an indirect exploration of childhood

trauma. The cat, 'Gone', is traumatised by the documented abuse. His death brings with it a meaninglessness, a kind of nihilism that is the beginning of Moosh's fall from grace and his own trauma, which is the impetus for a journey of self-discovery. Like all heroes, Moosh loses his mentor and must forge his own identity. He ultimately emerges at peace but hardened and changed, having grown through his quest to survive. The fact that the experience is one of homelessness, contextualised in the hybrid form of Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, means that the performance provides a forum for exploring both the ideas contained in the social experience and forms of representation of these ideas and experiences.

THE INTERCULTURAL THEATRE AS A PEDAGOGICAL SPACE

The type of theatrical experience, rich in deep affect, that takes place in the practice described above creates a 'conversational reality' (Welsh, 2014), in the form of stage directions, words, movements and cultural echoes. It is a construction of solidarity in action; it is a doing of empathy. In this sense, it is pedagogical on a personal level and, in terms of Freire, it is politicised by unifying the voices of the oppressed in the conversation of stage directions. By engaging in this intercultural practice, we are utilising the languages of words, stage directions, and movement to participate in a conversation.

As a progression of this work, we suggest that this hybrid art form provides a constructive framework for combining two separate cultural foundations for educational purposes. The education that takes place between performers is perhaps comparable to the 'informal pedagogy' that is claimed to occur in youth and community work or psychotherapy (Jefferies & Smith, 2021). It is when the self comes to a realisation through engagement with a youth worker or therapist, for example, and is an internal education, an education of the self, a somewhat private language that occurs in the throes of performance for the purposes of representation. We are claiming here that the realisation contained in a statement like, 'My childhood was like this' or 'I thought that experience meant x when it actually means y,' arrived at through the conversational process of therapy or care, is perhaps similar to the realisations of a performer arrived at through direction and collaboration. This thinking has a relationship with Freire's conscientization and liberation (2018). When we perform, we are

freeing ideas from their containment in a single consciousness, expanding our understanding and practices into a shared consciousness. The sharing of ideas through the language of performance is an act of solidarity, firstly established between performer and performer, and then performer and audience. When this liberatory act contains within it an intercultural language that is not expressed in words, but carried between cultural utterances in actions, then the body and its actions and, in this case, Persian Dramatic Story Telling movement, translate language and cultural experiences into the process of the broad story-telling contained in the whole performance. For example, Moosh's story is represented in the body of the Persian Dramatic Story Teller, so that it becomes a discourse on the experience being represented. But can the pedagogical impact of this hybrid form of theatre reach further than actors and audience?

In developing this hybrid theatrical form, Welsh and Sheshgelani have constructed a coherent language that is a form in itself, a habitus that ultimately makes the communication occurring between performer/s and audience an indirect language. For the audience it is almost the ideal of a 'private language'. That is, the language act of the script is consumed by the body of the performer, in this case the poet and Persian story-teller. In this language act, we can conceive of the theatre itself as a site for 'public pedagogy' (Charman & Dixon, 2021). By considering the theatre as an educational context, the notion of intercultural exchange through a hybrid practice becomes a unique form of pedagogy.

The authors of this paper are also teachers in Higher Education at Victoria University, Melbourne, whose stated values are 'Welcoming, Ethical, Shaping the Future (progressive) and Together'. In our teaching, we use theatre-making to introduce Education students to Higher Education, critical thinking and concepts of personal and professional identity. Through the use of Boal's games for actors and non-actors, we open up conversations about power and introduce students to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018). We encourage students to represent their educational journeys through the use of drama (McLaren, Welsh, & Long, 2021). As pedagogues, and performance artists, our focus is on developing analytical skills through the experiences of doing and being, and creating opportunities for students to build networks of belonging, intellectually and emotionally. We are keen to bring affect into our work and encourage the

engagement of the whole person in the learning process (McLaren & Welsh, 2021). We also explore the *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (Freire, 2014) through the practice of drama as it is applied in our course and unit, and through student reflections on their experiences within educational systems. Students explore their learning journeys through drama practice, and then combine these in a collective performance. They are introduced to a range of theatrical and educational concepts, and develop skills through drama games. They are supported to share and express their stories, and to find common and distinctive elements in the stories. Through the use of metaphor, and a range of storytelling techniques, they create an ethno-drama, which they perform before their teachers and peers. The process created and described by Welsh and Sheshgelani in this paper can be particularly impactful for these Higher Education students. Whilst both Welsh and Sheshgelani have utilised their own practice in classrooms at Victoria University, this final ideal of ‘togetherness’ implies a collectivism and solidarity that is crucial to Freire’s notion of collectivism as a means for liberatory literacy (2018). The proposed intercultural practice is a powerful educative tool because it blurs the line between educator and educated, teacher and learner. It draws on a social hybridity which occurs when the students combine and perform their stories in the unit (McLaren & Welsh, 2020), and offers them different ways of engaging physically, emotionally, and linguistically with the stories they are telling. It offers a way of connecting students to their heritage, their personal stories, and each other. It invites students to think and feel deeply about identity, purpose and aesthetics. It is also liberating—although both Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction have ‘rules’, the hybrid form of these opens up new spaces for students to explore. It offers them a way of telling their stories that is beyond the norms of theatre as they have experienced them.

We claim that the collective and distinctively intercultural conversation between two ‘outsider’ experiences that occurs in this hybrid creative process has potential for enhancing both pedagogical and ontological knowledge. When this knowledge is taken into Higher Education classrooms, it invites deep responses from students, connecting their personal stories with wider social and cultural experiences. It honours the complexity of heritage reflected in our student cohort, the power of recognising and physically representing intersectionality, and offers new ways for students to express knowing

and belonging.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intercultural fusion of two distinct methods of performance practice that, when combined, create a hybrid form. It has documented the collaboration that has constructed this hybrid practice, its application in performance and its potential in pedagogical contexts. This paper also makes the long-standing claim that theatre practice can perform a significant social function, through questioning and expressing particular beliefs, so that the theatre makers, performers and audience can become agents of social change. In this paper, we have shown how this might occur in the stage directions of a hybrid piece of theatre, where social and intercultural engagements are imagined and reside. In this way, drama in all its forms, becomes a forum for exploring ideas through the action of performance, the medium of the script and the creative space that exists between script and performance.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Welsh, S., Sheshgelani, E., and McLaren, M-R. (2023). Collective outsider theatre practice: Creating an intercultural hybrid form of practice-based conversation. *ArtsPraxis*, 10 (1), pp. 21-34.

REFERENCES

- Boal, A. (2021). *Games for actors and non-actors*. Routledge.
- Brook, P. (1996). *The empty space: A book about the theatre: Deadly, holy, rough, immediate*. Vol. 11. Simon and Schuster.
- Charman, K., & Dixon, M. (2021). *Theory and methods for public pedagogy research*. Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Freire, P., Freire, A. M. A., & De Oliveira, W. F. (2014). *Pedagogy of solidarity* (Vol. 4). Left Coast Press.
- Jeffs, T., & Smith, M. K. (2021). *The education of informal*

- educators. *Education Sciences*, 11 (9), p. 488.
- Liu, S. (2013). Introduction: Modernity, Interculturalism, and Hybridity. In: *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China*. Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137306111_1
- McLaren, M. R., Welsh, S., & Long, S. (2021). Subverting perceptions of academic and professional learning with drama. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 49 (3), pp. 249-261.
- Sheshgelani, E. (2022). [Dance in Persian Dramatic Storytelling](#).
- Sheshgelani, E., and Naghshbandi, S. (2022). An Autoethnography of Dance-ription. Sixteenth International Conference on Design Principles and Practices, Newcastle, Australia.
- Welsh, S. S. (2016). *Real Fiction Theatre as Drama Education*. PhD thesis, Victoria University.
- Welsh, S., Sheshgelani, E. (2016). [The Privilege of Dignity, Poetry Performance and Movement](#).
- Yorks, L., & Kasl, E. (2002). Toward a theory and practice for whole-person learning: Reconceptualizing experience and the role of affect. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52 (3), pp.176-192.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Scott Welsh is an academic and writer working in creativity, literacy and education. He teaches and writes about social issues in education, creative, literacy, and sociology pedagogies. He brings his lived experience as a social outsider for many years to his work in the Faculty of Arts and the Department of Sociology at the University of Melbourne and continues to contribute to practice-based Arts Education programs and research at Victoria University, where he completed his PhD. He is a practising poet, playwright and sociologist.

Elnaz Sheshgelani is a storyteller, theatre maker, puppeteer and educator. She holds a PhD in Performing Arts where she explored pre-Islamic Naghali (a lost form of Persian dramatic storytelling) and reconstructed a Naghali gestural vocabulary. Elnaz is deeply interested in the performative aspects of communication and has focused on the design and creation of body forms, developing body movement vocabularies for storytelling. She has applied/workshopped vocabularies in her various performances and workshops at La Mama

Theatre (Melbourne, Australia) and at international festivals in Armenia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Elnaz is a member of UNESCO's International Dance Council (CID). She teaches Creativity and the Arts in Education at Victoria University, and is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies (2022).

Mary-Rose McLaren is a professor of Education and Social Knowledge at Victoria University, Melbourne. She is also a theatre maker, and works at the intersection of theatre practice, theory and learning. With Scott Welsh, she has brought theatre practice into teaching in Higher Education as a way of creating belonging, breaking down barriers, and developing critical thinking about experiences. Her most current research focusses on values, affect and ethics in learning environments.