

Performer and Audience Responses to Ethnotheatre: Exploring Conflict and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

George and Vince are engaged in a dialogue in which they reflect on meaningful ways that ethnotheatre can be employed as both a research methodology and a form of dissemination. In addition to examining some of the literature available on ethnotheatre, their discussion highlights some of the ethical and methodological issues that may arise when using this approach to conduct research. The authors share examples of how each of them have engaged in ethnodrama pieces, discussing why this approach proved a viable means to explore their respective research contexts. Feedback from participants and audience members who witnessed the ethnodrama performances provide insightful perspectives to critically examine the efficacy and potential of ethnotheatre.

The emotional impact on me was amazing. I became angry, annoyed and frustrated and did not know why. Reliving the event in this way, watching actors living my life; reciting words that rang true, collecting all the catch phrases, the despair, the humour, the anger, all that was misunderstood, and the turmoil that many of us went through, put things into perspective for me.

-*Voices in Conflict*, Performer participant¹

The ethnodrama *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves* was very powerful because it engaged us as audience members – it was evocative and involving – ‘holistic.’ It integrated ‘feeling’ into the research.

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience participant

THE DIALOGUE

George: Vince, I think we should note from the outset that research in ethnotheatre has developed and matured tremendously in the last two decades. The practical and theoretical work of Mienczakowski (1997; 2001), Goldstein (2001), Gray (2000; 2002; 2003), Taylor (2006), among others, has been instrumental in defining this innovative and embodied approach to research. And more recently, Gallagher (2007) has closely examined some of the ethics and meaning when using ethnotheatre as a form of research. Her work provides us with valuable questions as researchers, especially because this field is evolving so rapidly.

Vince: And in ways that are influencing research in a variety of fields. My first impression of ethnotheatre was that it seemed to be an ideal form of inquiry for researchers like you, George, who come from a theatre background. However, we’re increasingly seeing how it can be meaningfully applied to various fields of study.

George: Including your own, Vince.

Vince: Absolutely. I’ve grown to appreciate its extraordinary potential to support research in counselling psychology and education. You mention

¹ The performer drew several excerpts from a collection of lectures, seminars and interviews with Anais Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, edited by Eveyln J. Hinz.

the work of Gray and Mienczakowski. Both of them come from a healthcare background, and they have found innovative ways to apply ethnotheatre in their work. But, we haven't mentioned Johnny Saldaña. Arguably, it is Saldaña (2005, 2003, 1998) who has articulated most clearly the potential of ethnotheatre as a form of artistic research endeavour.

George: I agree. Saldaña's understanding and application of theatre as both art and research is unique. Like Cecily O'Neill's (1995) work on process drama, Saldaña brings theatre and educational research together without compromising the art form or the integrity of the research inquiry.

Vince: Certainly a delicate balance to maintain, and one that gives rise to some fundamental questions about this form of inquiry. Your reference to Saldaña's ability to engage in this form of research without compromising the art highlights an area of particular uncertainty for me. I find myself questioning to what extent is some level of expertise in theatre required in order to remain true to ethnotheatre.

George: Some of the literature on ethnotheatre examines this very issue, with differing views by scholars generating "two camps engaged with dramatic performance as research" (Gray, 2003, p.254). The majority (camp) are identified as researchers, often ethnographers from the social sciences, health sciences and humanities, who are finding innovative and meaningful ways to present their data through performance.² The smaller group consists of theatre artists who make use of (auto)ethnography, (auto)biography or similar approaches within their playwriting—sometimes without realizing they are indeed conducting qualitative forms of research (Grace & Wasserman, 2006).³

² See Diamond & Mullen, 2000; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Finley & Finley, 1999; Goldstein, 2001; Gray, 2003; Mienczakowski, 1997; Pifer, 1999.

³ This group could include American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie*), Eugene O'Neill (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), Canadians Sharon Pollock (*Doc*), Guillermo Verdecchia (*Fronteras Americanas*), Djanet Sears (*Afrika Solo*); drama educators Joe Norris (2000), Michael Rohd (1998, 2005), and Johnny Saldaña (1998, 2003, 2005); and independent writers such as Anna Deavere Smith who has turned her

Vince: A sense of collaboration between these so-called camps, using the unique strengths of the researcher and artist, would seem ideal.

George: And this is precisely what Saldaña (2003) suggests: “[s]cholars in ethnography have much to contribute to those initially educated as artists, and artists well versed in the creative process and products of theatre have much to offer ethnographers. Both disciplines, after all, share a common goal: to create unique, insightful, and engaging text about the human condition” (p. 229).

Vince: In this sense, ethnotheatre strives for a weaving of research and art, rather than an either/or situation, which is quite reductive.

George: Wearing the Secret Out by Chapman, Swedberg, Sykes (2003), included in Saldaña’s anthology *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (2005), exemplifies this spirit of collaboration as a researcher and two theatre artists join forces to create an ethnotheatre piece about homophobia in the teaching profession.

Vince: In addition to highlighting the integration of art and research, this piece illustrates ethnotheatre’s potential to meaningfully engage audiences and performers in issues of social justice. Arguably, these are matters that exceed the limitations of a text-bound (re)presentation. The performative space provides an integral opportunity to engage with lived experience(s) of marginalization and oppression on an embodied level. That is not to suggest that this form of engagement enables one to actually experience events or circumstances as others have. In fact, I would argue that paradoxically, ethnotheatre induces a heightened appreciation for the sacredness of these lived experience(s) through the feelings of resonance and profound empathy that are often powerfully evoked.

George: Absolutely, and your point brings forth the significant role that audience plays in this form of research. I have found that the intended audience for a particular ethnodrama needs to be considered. For

research of actual events into a series of one-woman performances (*Twilight: Los Angeles*, 1992; *Fires in the Mirror*, 1993).

example, writers may privilege the performance/aesthetic over the content data, if they're introducing a concept that may be unfamiliar or they're reaching a wider, general audience. However, in other cases, such as Mienczakowski's work with patients who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, the artistry may be of secondary consequence (Mienczakowski et al., 2002). When performed research is targeted for an audience of informants who will see the production and then participate in post-performance discussions, Mienczakowski, Smith, Morgan (2002) suggest that "accuracy and credibility are more important (to health-related audiences) than theatrical traditions and expectations" (p.34).

Vince: In both respects, we see how researcher and artist inform and support each other's practice. Clearly, each has a great deal to contribute. This notion of which is privileged or emphasized helps guide much of the critical decision-making that occurs throughout the process, reconciling possible tensions that may arise when art and research find themselves at cross purposes.

George: That's right. We cannot underestimate the significance of audience in determining whether art or research is (consciously or unconsciously) privileged in the conception of an ethnotheatre piece.

Vince: In both of our work, we can see examples of how audiences and/or performers feature prominently in determining where this emphasis is placed. As researchers, we give careful consideration to the purpose, nature and ethical implications of the dramatic engagement. In such instances, I believe that we never completely set aside the aesthetic, largely because of the integral role it plays in engaging the participant. To simply disregard it, would no doubt significantly diminish much of what makes ethnotheatre such a powerful research approach.

George: Absolutely, and this is clearly evidenced in the audience and performer responses that we've collected in our respective projects. Like the majority of authors we cite above, we've engaged in ethnotheatre as a form of research. And, I suggest, that the experience in itself of creating and producing ethnotheatre has been fruitful, pushing ourselves and our audiences into new ways of thinking about art and research.

Vince: I agree. Our own experiences of creating, performing, and now writing about ethnotheatre has given us both an opportunity to better understand and hopefully advance this relatively new field/approach to research. Our discussions have revealed different lenses through which this methodology can be considered. But what can we contribute to the research literature? How can we shed light from another angle on this work, and hopefully advance our knowledge?

George: Vince, I notice that you refer to ethnotheatre as a research methodology. That's interesting, because, to date, I've incorporated ethnotheatre more as a form of dissemination of previous research.

Vince: This is an important distinction to make. George, your research and much of the work we've cited here illustrate how ethnotheatre can meaningfully represent research findings in a way that transcends traditional approaches. It has certainly proven itself a viable means to affect praxis between researcher and practitioner.

George: This is certainly true in the case of drama education. I feel that it is important for me as a researcher to give careful consideration as to how my work can be best represented in order to inform classroom practice. Ethnotheatre enables us to actively engage, and perhaps even 'discover' new research findings on a personal and embodied level. But your reference to ethnotheatre as a methodology suggests that it also serves as a form of inquiry.

Vince: Yes. In my recent project, *Voices in Conflict: The Lived Experience(s) of the British Columbia Public Teachers' Job Action of October 2005*⁴, I was searching for a form of engagement that would

⁴ *Voices in Conflict: The Lived Experience(s) of the British Columbia Public Teachers' Job Action of October 2005* was first performed at the University of British Columbia in June of 2006. It was staged again several weeks later at a local high school where it was open to the public. The play is a dramatization of data collected during events of October 2005, when British Columbia Public Teachers defied essential service legislation and walked off the job for ten days in protest of a second imposed contract by the provincial government. In addition to field notes recorded on the picket line, at the Supreme Court of

enable participants to gain a deeper understanding of perspectives that significantly contrasted from their own. In this regard, I was employing ethnotheatre both as a means to represent those perspectives, and also as a vehicle for studying the effect of performatively engaging with these perspectives.

George: So, the performance itself served as another site of research?

Vince: Yes, because data collection was extended to include performer and audience responses to the ethnodrama. Yet another layer of the research evolved from this process when these responses shaped a new direction for the project.

George: Given your last point, I think it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at audience and performer responses, and consider what these tell us about ethnotheatre and its viability both as a means of dissemination and a form of inquiry, particularly in relation to our own research in areas related to social justice and conflict.

Vince: With *Voices in Conflict*, it's interesting to note that my use of ethnotheatre on this project evolved organically. I found myself collecting artefacts of these memorable events from sources that were clearly in opposition with each other. I felt that I was being pulled in so many different directions. I would go from spending my mornings on the picket line to attending afternoon court proceedings that were aimed at forcing the teachers back to work. There was also widespread local and national media attention on the event, and countless people were 'sounding off' their opinions about the whole matter through various means including the Internet. I found myself desperately seeking the best approach to examine all of these artefacts in order to make some sense of it all. But this alone didn't seem to go far enough for me. I felt that what was sorely needed in this situation was an opportunity for everyone involved to 'perform' the role of a different 'character' in the conflict, in the hope that it might promote new insights and enable people

British Columbia hearings, and during public forums, the performance included opinions anonymously posted by the public on a popular Internet site known as Craigslist. Other commentary and dialogue in the play were based on narratives shared through interviews by those who experienced the job action events both first-hand and from a distance.

to gain some perspective of the other side. These circumstances brought to mind Conquergood's (1986) assertion that "the act of performance fosters identification between dissimilar ways of being" (p.30). Ethnotheatre seemed to offer a uniquely viable approach to giving participants the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the perspective of 'other.'

George: So, your initial intentions to examine the lived experiences associated with these events eventually transformed to explore how the tension and/or conflict of opposing voices could be brought to life through ethnotheatre?

Vince: Exactly. I found myself unexpectedly expanding the research context to examine how individual perceptions and opinions might be influenced by engaging in the dramatization of a particular conflict as either a performer or audience member. I wanted to know if drama might provide a means for developing a deeper awareness of the opposing views involved in a particular conflict. Also, I sought to determine whether or not engaging in a dramatization of this nature, as either a performer or audience member, promoted a greater willingness to seek a resolution or compromise that was satisfactory to both sides.

George: And what kind of feedback were you able to gather on these questions?

Vince: There were a number of participant and audience responses that particularly caught my attention:

When I walked [in the theatre], the first thing I saw was the picket signs. The feelings of distress and tension came flooding back to my mind and literally felt like a punch to my stomach ... comments (were) made during (the performance) that seemed like carbon copies of comments I had made or heard during the strike. I found it interesting to hear my own voice in some of the comments. I was very passionate and determined that I was correct while making the comments but now I am not so sure. I have many more questions this time around. I do not like the feelings of chaos. I do not want to be on the edge anymore!

-Voices in Conflict, Audience participant

George: What do you make of such a response?

Vince: Immediately it brings to mind the power of ethnotheatre in terms of what is embodied. This participant reminds us that the performative realm carries with it the potential to re-experience the past in a way that extends significantly beyond the written word. References to tension “flooding back” and the significance of hearing one’s “own voice in some of the comments” articulate a space that invites one into an active engagement with a particular experience.

George: The actors’ voices, body movements and the tension created during their interaction no doubt creates another reality for the audience, taking on a new life from their previous experience as individuals living through or witnessing the strike. I’m curious as to whether or not you informed the performers of your research intentions.

Vince: I did. I felt that I had to be clear with both audience and performer participants about my intentions from the outset. Both were informed that the play involved casting people in roles that represented the other side of their stance during the labour conflict. None of the performer participants expressed any reservation about taking on these roles, and many were actually enthused to do it. It was no secret that our purpose was to discover if these experiences would influence people’s perspectives on the conflict.

I was asked to play the part of a person who had crossed a picket line. This is against my philosophy and morality. I was excited by this possibility. I read the lines, tried to get into character, tried to appreciate the vantage point, even agreed with some of the views. I read with gusto, feeling and passion about a view I disagreed with. The bottom line? The rhetoric and rationalization for crossing the picket line was weak, self-serving, egotistical, arrogant, disrespectful and sad. I could read the words with passion as they were just that. The actual behaviour of using those words to cross was still as loathsome as it was before I read the part. The impact on my values was to understand the words, respect the right to say and feel them, to re-weigh some of the arguments, appreciate the view but to

simply reject the behaviour.

-*Voices in Conflict*, Performer participant

George: I sense a certain conviction from this participant's response that the engagement, while meaningful, didn't affect a change in his perspective.

Vince: True. His comments suggest that the experience provided an opportunity for him to look at this conflict on another level by taking on the character of someone with whom he fundamentally disagreed. However, what I think is particularly significant is how the participant describes engaging in this research context with "excitement," "passion" and "gusto." In my experience with other forms of inquiry, I don't recall ever having participants express this level of involvement. The fact that it ultimately didn't change his perspective on the actual conflict must be noted. (In other cases, respondents suggested that their positions were impacted.) Nevertheless, I think the meaningfulness of this level of engagement cannot be overstated.

George: You suggested that you also had the audience in mind during the construction of your piece? How so?

Vince: I was looking to their responses as a means to shape the next stage of inquiry and provide another layer of data collection. Therefore, following each performance, audience members were encouraged to participate in an open discussion with the director/writer and performers about their experience of the play and its implications. I also invited performers and audience members to provide written reflections that could be anonymously submitted via e-mail. In this sense, the ethnodrama became a stimulus for discussion and to gather future data. Audience and participant responses were integral to the process and provided rich discussions and data.

George: I find that fascinating, because one of the most significant findings during my extensive drama and social justice research was that elementary students (n = 6000) found post-production activities/discussions more memorable and meaningful than the production itself (Belliveau, 2006a).

Vince: Yet, wouldn't you say that without the production, these post-production activities could not have had the same impact, in terms of the level of reflection and discussion?

George: Exactly.

Vince: The same would be true with my ethnodrama project. If the production itself did not engage the audience, the vibrant post-discussions would not have taken place.

George: But, I want to come back to one of your earlier points regarding how you conceived the ethnodrama piece with audience participation in mind.

Vince: Sure.

George: Like your project, my ethnodrama piece *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves*⁵, which explored the lived experience of pre-service teachers creating an anti-bullying play, was further informed by each performance and the responses that we received from the audience in the discussions that followed. However, in constructing the ethnodrama, I had not initially intended to examine audience or participant feedback.

Vince: And in this regard, I think you uncover another vital feature of ethnotheatre, one that highlights its potential as a transformative and emergent form of inquiry. In terms of your intentions for this research, I get a sense that the process evolved in a manner that you may not have initially intended at the outset.

George: Yes. My initial intention with this project was to capture what

⁵ *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves* explores the experience of 12 pre-service teachers collectively creating an anti-bullying play that was to tour elementary schools. After writing four traditional papers about the learning and meaning that emerged from the drama research (Belliveau, 2004a; 2004b; 2005a; 2006a), I decided to closely examine the pre-service teachers' journals, my field notes, and the script they developed, as a stimulus to create a dramatized script of what emerged during the play-building process (Belliveau, 2006b) – in effect dramatizing the data (Saldaña, 2003). The ethnodrama has since been produced several times for educational gatherings and conferences.

was seen, as well as heard, during the field research, revealing both action and reaction. I wanted to find a way to articulate and embody the tensions that constructively enabled the pre-service teachers to create their social justice play, because I felt this was missing in the traditional papers I had written. How an audience would react to my ethnodrama was an afterthought. I sought their feedback through surveys to try and discover the meaning or value of using theatre to disseminate research.

Vince: And what did you discover?

George: In the over 40 audience responses to the question: “What did you take away from the research performance of *Collective Playbuilding*?”⁶ two dominant themes recurred: *Drama’s ability to depict the (inner and outer) voices of all stakeholders*, and the importance and relevance of *playing out the process and journey, not only the product and destination*.

Vince: I think this notion of giving voice to both inner and outer dialogues is particularly significant since it brings to our awareness so much of what is left unsaid in our everyday interpersonal engagements. Your work highlights how ethnotheatre can excavate these thoughts and emotions bringing them to the surface to re-shape our understanding of a given research context.

George: Along your train of thought, an audience member pointed out how:

The playing (acting) within the ethnodrama piece helped us as audience to constantly question so-called truth. We realized these were actors interpreting the stories of others. There was almost a Brechtian-alienation effect!

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience member

Vince: This highlights how certain forms of research are ultimately an

⁶ The piece was first performed in Victoria, British Columbia at the Provoking Curriculum conference (2005), then in Vancouver, British Columbia at the Investigating our Practices conference (2005), and finally in San Francisco, California at the American Education Research Association conference (2006).

interpretation, a particular perspective, of what took place. It emphasizes how in some research contexts it's nearly impossible for researchers to distance themselves fully from their perspective.

George: Another revealing comment made by an audience member shed light on how this particular ethnodrama brought forth bullying issues in various contexts:

The performance pulled me into the actual context of bullying and how student teachers and educators can work collaboratively to find ways to help kids effectively deal with it. As an audience member, I felt actively engaged with the research. It compelled me to consider the degree to which bullying exists among faculty members at our university, and how a performance of this nature might shed some light on the ways in which “power” is used among colleagues to further personal and professional self-interests. This led me to wonder about the performers and what their response to this type of engagement might be.

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience member

Vince: It is interesting to note how your ethnodrama appears to have caused this audience member to consider bullying from another perspective, perhaps provoked by being engaged with it in an ‘actual context.’ By recognizing how bullying relates to a power imbalance between individuals or groups, he or she is able to draw a parallel between the social injustices that are played out among kids, and that which similarly occurs between adults. I’d be curious to know if any of your performers raised particular issues during your process.

George: On a slightly different angle, one of the performers raised an ethical question about the scripting of my ethnodrama piece. She wondered about the authenticity and implications of blending the voices of a number of interviewees or responses into one character. Because each of my characters in *Collective Playbuilding* represents a mixture of several sources, no character speaks for one participant. Instead, each is an integration of many voices. She was aware in the construction of the piece that we took some artistic license by connecting voices together. Sometimes we even changed words, shortened a long sentence, or even added a sentence – keeping the spirit but trying to

make the data artistically engaging.

Vince: This returns us to the fundamental questions of ‘how’ and ‘why,’ which researchers who employ ethnotheatre must be prepared to address, particularly since they carry with them important ethical implications. George, you’ve highlighted the ongoing debate on whether or not ethnodramatists should remain faithful to the exact text collected during the research, or whether they should permit themselves the artistic and methodological license to represent the essence (a theatricalized version) of their collected data. Transforming your research into a script is not an easy task, because as researchers we often feel that something is lost when we don’t directly present our data findings.

George: Yet, as we’ve come to know, much is gained when we work with the data through drama. Elements of the research can be shown through movement, sound, space, which cannot always be represented in a written document.

Vince: This issue is something I’ve wrestled with since first being introduced to ethnotheatre. To address it from an ethical standpoint, I found it helpful to temporarily set aside the question of artistic value, and focus exclusively on researcher intent. I’ve come to appreciate how ethnotheatre serves as a powerful vehicle for representing data collected within a given research context. For this reason the question of whether we ought to theatricalize data is particularly relevant (Saldaña, 2003). What are our ethical obligations to research participants who share with us their lived experiences? What responsibilities do we have to cultures or other social systems that we examine in depth?

George: If we state that our purpose is to represent the lived experience(s) of research participants or a particular culture, then I believe the researcher has an ethical obligation to tread delicately when fictionalizing data that has emerged within this context. At the very least, participants must be afforded an opportunity to be involved in this process, or at least approve of these dramatic ‘representations.’ It may not be enough to simply inform people from the outset of our intention

to dramatize this data, given that they cannot possibly know the end result clearly enough to provide informed consent.

Vince: I agree, and in the case of *Voices in Conflict*, I felt obligated to check in with participants whenever I made changes or took liberties with data they had provided for the script. This created yet another layer of research, because these discussions often prompted new questions that unearthed another level of my understanding about these events. In this respect, it represented a recursive approach to engaging participants in the telling of their stories, a method similar to that which Arvey employs in her constructivist approach to narrative inquiry (2003). This also gave participants an opportunity to conceptualize their opinions and perspectives in dramatic form. I was surprised to find that participants often wanted to consider the aesthetic value, and how it would contribute artistically to the larger piece.

George: What's fascinating about the debate (tension) between original data versus theatricalized data is that we are currently engaged in it. This script is an edited version – the essence of what we have developed over a few months of dialoguing, e-mailing, and phone conversations. As Saldaña (2005) would suggest, we're looking for "the juicy stuff" (p. 16) and left the so-called boring stuff out.

Vince: This returns us to the question of artistic value and that delicate balance we spoke of earlier. For instance, in our current dialogue that we are presenting here, our intention is not to entertain necessarily, but rather to inform and share with our audience aspects of dramatizing data. Whereas in a play geared towards performance we would likely include theatrical elements such as rising tensions and climax. Generally, theatre scripts are blueprints for performance, meant to be lifted from the page. So, can our current engagement be called a play?

George: Saldaña, in his provocative piece "This is Not a Performative Text" (2006), would say absolutely not. I think the distinction can be best understood in terms of engagement and an embodied experience. A play requires engaging an audience on various levels. Words alone do not fully achieve this. And there are other dramatic characteristics to consider. For instance, our conversation lacks conflict – the dialogue is likely too cooperative to become a play.

Vince: I agree that this is more of a carefully constructed transcribed conversation, which would arguably fail to engage a theatre audience. However, don't you think that's a little narrow of a spectrum of what defines a play?

George: Ah, Vince, I see your intent here ... trying to create a little tension, are you?

Vince: Perhaps.

George: Well, yes, our description of what constitutes a play may be too representative of a Western perspective.

Vince: I know that neither of us would want to constrain the ways in which theatre may be conceptualized because both of us have discovered first-hand the seemingly endless layers of inquiry that emerge from engaging with research on an embodied level. These have occurred as a result of our willingness to expand ways of thinking about theatre beyond it simply representing a tool for research dissemination.

George: Indeed. And for this, we owe a great deal of gratitude to those who first imagined the rich potential that exists within theatrical spaces for researching all of the complexities of the human condition. We both have much to look forward to in the unfolding of ethnotheatre and the work it continues to inspire.

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