

Keynote Address: The Art of Fabrication

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What an amazing ontological and epistemological space-time we live in today. The sociopolitical era of the United States' Trump administration has been labeled "post-truth," where the phenomena of "alternative facts" "fake news," and pseudo-1984 "newspeak" have distorted perceptions of reality and our core assumptions of what is true, what is false, what is to be believed, what is to be fact-checked, and who is to be trusted.

Objective reality, if there really is such a thing, is no longer considered a valid construct in the post-positivist world. In spite of strong evidentiary warrants and the supportive magnitude of results from big data, we seem to be driven more by our personal values, attitudes, and beliefs of what we feel, sometimes more than what we rationally think, to be true.

I facetiously blame the post-structuralist movement, with its philosophical tenets of "complexity," "messiness," "ambiguity,"

“uncertainty,” “unanswerable questions” “troubling the data,” “rejection,” “refusal,” and “failure” for possibly getting us into this conundrum. Some social critics called Barack Obama the first socially conscious postmodern President. As an analogous leap, I call Donald Trump our first post-structuralist President. A recent journal article by me and a colleague, Leo A. Mallette, analyzed the discourse of a Trump campaign speech, and in grounded theory fashion, we concluded that the axial category that characterizes the environmental or cultural driver of Trump’s discourse and now his governance is *fabrication*—

Trump drives his presidential campaign through an environment of grandiose declarations of blame, and bombastic promises of what he can build. As suggested by his discourse on fences [and border walls], *fabrication is the core category and culturally codified driver of this ... environment*—that is, fabrication as things constructed for purposes of deception.

Fabrication as things constructed for purposes of deception. Speaking of theatre....

BLURRY MOMENTS

This address is not about politics. This plenary session is about art. But some people seem to have difficulty separating the two. I’ve never liked what was taught in our dramatic theory and criticism classes, that “all theatre is political.” I understood that as I was watching socially-charged ethnodramatic plays such as *The Laramie Project* or *The Vagina Monologues*, but I find it very hard to believe that all theatre is political as I’m watching a chorus of well-dressed waiters, played mostly by gay men, dancing to and singing “Hello Dolly!”

Theatrical fluff aside, don’t think that the arts are mere innocent imitators of life. We’re not just a reflection of human nature—we’re a distorting fun house mirror full of “blurry moments,” as Peter O’Connor identified it. The dramatic studio and theatrical performance space are

dimpled and broken, obscured in places, operating as a concave or at other times a convex lens. As such, it throws unexpected and distorted images back. It does not imitate what looks into the mirror

but deliberately highlights some things and obscures others. It is deliciously ... unpredictable in terms of what might be revealed and what might remain hidden.

Thus, theatre is not just a reflection, we're a refraction. If art imitates life, then for more than a decade, the arts have been digitally distorting the truth, just as discursive distortions of truth are happening today.

Nowadays, visual artists working with the medium of photography can digitally alter and photoshop images to doctor reality in order to make it appear better or more arresting.

Music, with its electronic recording wizardry can auto tune the imperfectly pitched voice, and change the dynamics of tempo to make something playback slower or faster without changing its original level.

Dance integrates technology into its onstage performances more and more, so that live bodies, light, and projections synthesize and interact in such ways that it's sometimes difficult to separate what is real from what is digitally produced.

And theatre? We've been lying for thousands of years. Fake news? Theatre is fake life. But you'd think that ethnodrama, with its focus on social reality—and especially verbatim theatre at its most unedited truthfulness—would cut through the pretense of our art form to present real life with unadulterated fidelity. But we are masters of fabrication and thus masters of deception.

TAKING CARE OF BABY

Case in point: I was absolutely engrossed and in awe of Dennis Kelly's ethnodrama, *Taking Care of Baby*. The story, the interview texts, were some of the most engaging I've ever read in the genre. So excited was I by the ethnodrama that I conducted some online searching to learn more about the play and its playwright. My excitement was soon quashed, however, by learning that *Taking Care of Baby* is a "faux" ethnodrama. Kelly uses the stylistic techniques of verbatim theatre and documentary theatre for a fictional set of participants recounting their experiences of a woman's trial for murdering her two children. Though the account is based on real life news stories, all reconstructed interviews in the play are fake. The script teases the audience to reconsider what is true, authentic, and real in today's sensationalist

media. In other words, what I thought was reality was, in fact, a fabrication.

LADIES DAY

Alana Valentine's *Ladies Day* is another fascinating example of truth slanted in an ethnodrama. The verbatim play examines a group of gay men in Australia with the playwright herself integrated as a character in the work. A gay rape scene, as recounted by one of the playwright's participants, is actually dramatized in the play, followed later with a climactic, highly charged physical struggle in which the rapist is killed by his victim—a story also told to the playwright by a participant, illustrating the severe homophobic violence that happens in gay men's lives.

In the final scenes, however, the playwright learns that some of her participants "exaggerated" the crimes, and changed the details of what actually occurred. Thus, audiences have witnessed highly dramatic and tragic events that never really happened but were initially accepted in good faith as fact by the interviewer. At the end of the play, the participants themselves challenge the playwright and us to consider what is true and what is real when stories are told. Scholar-playwright Tara Goldstein says of *Ladies Day* that Alana Valentine smartly lies to her audience in order to tell the truth.

In this era of post-truth, where fact and fiction seem to have blurry boundaries, do ethnodrama and ethnotheatre still have a place as genres of the art form? I would offer a resounding yes. In fact, I would offer, more than ever. But that comes with a caveat.

HANDLE WITH CARE?

I was not the first to develop the term "reality squared," but I applied it to ethnodramas and ethnotheatrical productions that utilized, indeed, exploited, the devices of theatre and media production to stylize and heighten the presentation and representation of reality on stage. Rather than the naturalistic, verbatim monologue presented by the sole actor on a bare stage, reality squared productions employ theatricality to visually and narratively arrest the audience member. Contradictorily, they skew reality in order to represent reality.

Here's just one example of a reality squared production: a chorus

of women representing the inside voices of a patient learning that she has breast cancer in Ross Gray and Christina Sinding's health care ethnodrama, *Handle with Care?* The texts are solidly grounded and derived from interviews with cancer patients and survivors, but collaged to heighten the dizzying array of thoughts that may go through a person's mind upon hearing a potentially fatal diagnosis.

BLACK WATCH

Psychologist Daniel Berlyne examined the construct of creativity, and posited three aesthetic variables that made something "creative": novelty, uncertainty or surprisingness, and complexity. These three variables are my own *modus operandi* in what I create, though the complexity construct is sometimes difficult for me to achieve since one of my own aesthetic principles is elegance.

But it's fascinating to think how even verbatim texts can be embellished with theatricality—the truth of interview texts in concert with the fabrications of theatre production. This scene from the celebrated National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke is an exemplar of Berlyne's aesthetic principles with ethnodramatic narratives. A former soldier recounts to an interviewer the history of Scottish military involvement in war, and a bit about the Scottish military uniform—subjects not all that interesting to everyone, but given significance through clever staging. The monologue's language is rather coarse, as soldiers will often speak, and his thick dialect may be difficult to understand. But the focus here is on the visual accompaniment to the stories: truth told in a novel, surprising, and complex way.

shots: a love story

Reality is not a universal, indisputable truth, but a subjective experience for each person. As ethnodramatists, our goal is not to capture generic reality, but to understand someone else's reality and to portray it as faithfully as we can on the page and on the stage. Our interpretation and artistic choices, to be sure, may morph that reality somewhat when we give it aesthetic shape, but by looking at life from someone else's perspective—something that theatre people are very well trained to do—we can hopefully realize their reality in ways that may seem nonrealistic

to us.

As an example, let's watch a scene from the ethnodrama *shots: a love story* by John Caswell, Jr., this year's Page 73 Playwriting Fellow. In this autoethnodramatic rendering, Caswell portrays for the audience what it's like to be an alcoholic, not just through text, but through physical theatre and music that illustrate the surreal world of addiction. The only male character in the show, named he, symbolizes alcohol. Caswell represents himself through the use of three women, named her, her again, and her once more. His reason for using three women rather than one man to represent his personal experiences? I at first speculated that the three women symbolized the three times the playwright might have fallen off the wagon, but Caswell later admitted, three women were used simply because it was trendy in theatre production at the time. He may be an addict, but he's still an artist. You may not be able to detect a small prop in the video, but what the women are passing from one hand to another are shot glasses.

LONDON ROAD

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz wrote about "blurred genres" several decades ago, in which the firmly fixed boundaries at the time of social constructs were becoming more fluid and porous. The defining differences between art and science, between fiction and nonfiction, became intermingled and synthesized to create hybrid forms. Anthropology today is relying more on video production, in addition to traditional written monographs, as ethnographic representation and presentation of fieldwork. And ethnographies as written texts themselves have evolved from fact-laden accounts into critical, feminist, arts-based, and autoethnographic forms.

The arts have always blurred our genres, mixing visual art and theatre for performance art, for example; or song, dance, and drama for musical theatre. Synthesis is an interesting principle. It's not an additive algorithm but an integrative heuristic—or, method of discovery. Synthesis blends different things in order to form a new whole. Last night's preview of Lifejacket Theatre's *America is Hard to See* was a beautiful exemplar of media, live action, and music in concert.

Eleven years ago, in spring 2006, on this very campus for a previous ethnodrama conference, I speculated that it would be fascinating to see

if ethnotheatre would evolve into operatic or musical theatre representations of verbatim interview texts. I love it when I'm right. Five years later in 2011, the National Theatre's production of Alecky Blythe and Adam Cook's *London Road* appeared on the professional stage. The musical play examined the tragic murders of prostitutes in Ipswich and the uneasiness the morbid crimes created among members of the community. Cook took excerpts from Blythe's interview transcripts to serve as verbatim, free verse lyrics. In this clip, there is a brief suggested sex scene—so heads up for those who may be concerned about such images.

ARTISTIC RIGOR

In qualitative inquiry, Lincoln and Guba reconceptualized the criteria for rigor in naturalistic research. Instead of the positivist constructs of reliability and validity, two of the new domains for assessing our work are credibility and trustworthiness. These refer to the reader's belief that the way a researcher conducted the study, and the analytic processes and outcomes of the work, generated findings that make sense and persuade readers, or in our theatrical case, audiences, that an effective or trustworthy job was done. And what we attempt to create, particularly in ethnotheatre, is a sense of artistic rigor. This is what makes our work credible and trustworthy.

In my book, *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage*, I reflect that when I watch an ethnodrama on stage, I am seeking new knowledge about specific cultural groups. I seek significant trivia, not just big ideas. I seek artful moments, not just social activism. And I seek insight and revelation about *me*, not just the generic human condition. Every time I go to the theatre, regardless of genre, I search for entertainment, not just meaning. My personal goal as an artist—because it's also what I want as an audience member—is to develop an ethnotheatre aesthetic that captures on stage a complex rendering of what I label *ethnotainment*: "*Theatre's primary goal is to entertain—to entertain ideas as it entertains its spectators. With ethnographic performance, then, comes the responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative.*"

Just because Aristotle's been dead for several centuries, don't

dismiss his work. Millennia ago, I believe he hit the nail on the head with *The Poetics*. A good story still reigns as the most important component in maintaining the narrative and theatrical glue of our ethnodramatic work. We still need not characters but actual people we care about on stage, with conflicts we can relate to, themes that are relevant, dialogue that is not ponderous but melodious—the “organic poetry” that ethnotheatre pioneer Anna Deavere Smith captures in her verbatim texts, and perhaps more than ever, spectacle that engages our 21st century rewired visual and digital sensibilities.

I am privileged to read and peer review journal article manuscript submissions that include ethnodramatic play scripts. They vary in quality, to be sure, for some of them are written by well-meaning scholars ranging from education, sociology, and health care. But with no theatrical background, their attempts can be stilted or heavy handed, and their scripts sometime include such conventions as citations to the literature or referential footnotes within the monologue and dialogue. I’m always advising them that a play is not an academic journal article, so “Stop thinking like a social scientist and start thinking like an artist.” But sometimes I even need to remind theatre practitioners themselves to start thinking like an artist, to think theatrically. We’re working with substantive textual drama, yes, but don’t neglect the wide array of theatrical devices with which we have to work.

Today’s live theatrical productions have been significantly influenced by digital media and have progressed toward more visual storytelling through physical theatre and innovative entertainment technology. Reality theatre doesn’t always mean kitchen sink, fourth wall naturalism. Work that is novel, surprising, and complex will attract and engage the audiences we’re trying to reach and, if we’re successful, the audiences whose values systems and social worlds we’re trying to change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

So, in this post-truth era, what is ethnodrama and ethnotheatre’s role? First, don’t you dare call it post-ethnodrama or post-ethnotheatre or I swear I will hunt you down like a dog.

Second, perhaps our dramatic content needs to shift more with what is dramatically current. Our topic choices should be timely, in hopes of

being, like *The Laramie Project*, timeless. We could address the immigration crisis, LGBTQ issues, women's rights in a time of misogynistic, patriarchal rule. What would I personally want to see ethnodramas about? Topics like the dilemmas of immigrants and Planned Parenthood personnel, protesters on the streets and at airports. And yes, I want to see an ethnodrama of everyday citizens who are Donald Trump's most loyal supporters to help me understand why they think and believe the way they do.

Third, we should not be afraid to experiment with the genre. Hybridity is our forte. Ethnodramas accompanied with participatory components, aside from post-show discussions and talk-backs, have already been explored by groups such as Michael Rohd's Sojourn Theatre and David Feiner's Albany Park Theatre Project. DV8 Physical Theatre presents visually stunning productions, like *John*, creating ethnodramatic dance drama. Most recently, Joe Salvatore directed the national news-making ethnodrama, *Her Opponent*, which cleverly switches the genders in selected re-creations of the 2016 Trump-Clinton Presidential debates.

Fourth, media accessibility, ubiquitous hardware, and intuitive software have made video production not as formidable as it once was. Perhaps in the near future other scholars will explore writing teleplays and screenplays, and making short films of ethnodramatic work such as David Carless and Kitrina Douglas's portrait of coping with mental illness in *The Long Run*. The Internet will also provide scholars worldwide with a forum to archive and showcase their performance research in scripted and mediated forms for others.

Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre as qualitative research genres are currently on a moderate yet solid trajectory of growth. Academic journal articles employing the forms have been published with more frequency in titles such as *Qualitative Inquiry*. Additional books in arts-based research now appear on the market, like Patricia Leavy's *Method Meets Art*, and the commercial theatre still produces occasional works with some financial success. Even a few theses and dissertations have presented their findings in ethnodramatic form. As more scholars in non-theatre disciplines learn about these approaches, several will experiment with the methods to write and produce their research. Also, the current surge in autoethnography's popularity may motivate some of its writers to venture beyond journal writing and sit-down conference

readings, toward more artistically rendered staged performances of their stories.

There are still some skeptics within selected fields who have difficulty accepting these art forms as legitimate methods of inquiry. Ironically, like good researchers, we're presenting the truth—we're just presenting it more vividly. As poet Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." Only through quality exemplars of research as performance can nonbelievers become persuaded of theatre's ability to generate meaningful and powerful insights into human experiences.

CONCLUSION

As ethnotheatre artists, we are in the business of fabrication. Or the art of fabrication, which has an even more deceptive yet still nicely aesthetic ring to it. Think about it: we are purposely deceiving others—not in order to lie, but in order to tell the truth. But why are we asking our audiences to employ the willing suspension of disbelief—another phrase from theory and criticism class I absolutely hate. Why don't we just ask our audiences what we really want them to do when they attend an ethnotheatrical production: willingly believe.

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Publications, 2015), co-author with Matt Omasta for *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* (Sage Publications, 2018), and co-author with the late Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman for *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, Fourth Edition (Sage Publications, 2020). His most recent work is *Writing Qualitatively: The Selected Works of Johnny Saldaña* (Routledge, 2018). He has received book and research awards from the National Communication Association, the American Educational Research Association, and the American Alliance for Theatre & Education. His research methods works have been cited/referenced in more than 10,000 studies conducted in more than 130 countries.