

## **Reflections on an Ethnotheatre Aesthetic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The author proposes through five assertions that an ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists': 1) creative approaches to stage productions of natural social life; 2) application of available and new theatrical forms, genres, and styles onto the ethnodramatic play script and its production; 3) integrity to truthfulness as well as truth; 4) capacities for thinking theatrically as well as ethnographically; and 5) production and publication of research and creative activity in the genre to advance the field and to encourage dialogue among its practitioners. The author's personal goal as an artist is to develop an ethnotheatre aesthetic that captures on stage a complex rendering of ethnotainment.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

I've long thought that teaching and learning anthropology should be more fun than they often are. Perhaps we should not merely read

and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them... How, then, may this be done? One possibility may be to turn the more interesting portions of ethnographies into playscripts, then to act them out in class, and finally to turn back to ethnographies armed with the understanding that comes from “getting inside the skin” of members of other cultures... (Turner, 1982, pp. 89-90)

Victor Turner’s descriptions of his studio exercises in “ethnodramatics” (p. 100) make for fascinating reading. I wish I could have been there to participate as a student in his class’s explorations of culture, but I had the opportunity to instruct my own course in Ethnodrama and Ethnotheatre for undergraduates and graduates during the spring 2008 semester at Arizona State University. My course’s assigned and recommended readings of texts, articles, and play scripts ranged from works by Norman K. Denzin to Anna Deavere Smith. Viewings of ethnodramas in media format (e.g., *The Exonerated*, *The Laramie Project*, *United 93*) were also assigned. But what happened *during* class—the ethnodramatics—were some of the most intriguing and exciting moments I’ve encountered as an instructor.

I am grateful to New York University’s April 22-23, 2006 Forum on Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice for its preparatory contributions to my knowledge and experiential bases. I was honored to serve as an invited respondent for the Forum, and it was enriching to see a festival of reality theatre mounted on stage in such varied, creative forms. Though I have written about ethnodrama and ethnotheatre elsewhere in print (Saldaña, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009), I offer the following reflections that struck me most during the 2006 event and which, over three years later, are still with me.

Of all the participant questions posed by NYU Forum organizers, the most intriguing to me was, “Is there an ethnotheatre aesthetic?” My flip response was, “Yes. Next question....” But an inquiry as rich as this merits some thoughtful response. My five assertions below don’t claim to provide the definitive argument or answers to ethnotheatrical aesthetics that, for purposes of this paper, are defined as *significant accomplishments of artistic quality and merit in the genre*. But I do address one major theme that suggests an ironic paradox of ethnotheatre: The mounting of ethnographic reality on stage is at its

most effective when the production assumes a non-realistic—read: “theatrical”—style as its presentational framework.

**ASSERTION 1: An ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists’ creative approaches to stage productions of natural social life.**

You would think that the staging of ethnographic fieldwork, the mounting of real life, would suggest if not mandate that our play script adaptations adhere to the tenets of naturalism—or what has sometimes been labeled “verbatim theatre” or “conversational dramatism” in play production’s and performance studies’ explorations of human communication, social interaction, and conflict (Hammond & Steward, 2008; Stucky & Wimmer, 2002). I forewarn Theatre majors in my Theatre for Social Change class that they often make the worst Boalian Invisible Theatre actors because their actor training (and for some, their performative ego) gets in the way of creating naturalistic and believable yet pre-planned and surreptitious exchanges in public.

I once overheard two participants at an international Playback Theatre symposium in Arizona confess to each other that listening to other people’s actual stories can sometimes be “fatiguing” and even “boring.” I understand completely, for it is not necessarily the teller on stage sharing her story to the Playback Conductor that is intriguing, but its interpretive re-creation by the Playback performers. If art imitates life, then art needs to do so in an engaging manner for its audiences.

Can the everyday—the mundane—naturally staged, make good theatre? It certainly makes good ethnographic scholarship, for I was quite intrigued to learn that there is actually an academic publication called the *Journal of Mundane Behavior* (which even the editors acknowledge is a rather humorous title). It would be fascinating to peruse their articles with hopes of finding a study with ethnodramatic potential. But UK ethnodramatist Robin Soans cautions that “Some people are boring in a fascinating or amusing way, and others are just boring. And if it’s boring, it renders the whole [ethnotheatrical] exercise futile. What’s the point of gathering three hundred people in a darkened space merely to tell them something they’ve heard before, or worse, to send them to sleep?” (Hammond & Steward, 2008, p. 33).

Certainly, stories of physical abuse, racial discrimination, natural disaster, war, and sexual identity are “juicier” than those of our mundane

routines. The epiphanies of our lives make better monologues than everyday matters—most often. Yet there are times when I have been mesmerized as a reader and audience member by dramatic depictions of the “little things” in life that I thought no one but me was aware of. Perhaps we need to explore what it would mean to become twenty-first century Chekhovs—to find the drama in the mundane of our contemporary selves, to capture not just the content of our character but also the quirkiness of it. I have always been intrigued by Roberston Davies’ (1991) observation that “Theorists of drama may deal in tragedy and comedy, but the realities of life are played more often in the mode of melodrama, farce and grotesquerie” (p. 215).

Nevertheless, naturalism and realism in the hands of theatre artists can sometimes take on new interpretive meaning and become rich opportunities for creative reproduction. The early twentieth century “kitchen sink” dramas were faithful to reality but often uninspiring for a director’s conceptual vision. Perhaps it is because most of today’s ethnotheatrical artists fear that the sometimes dryness of interview transcripts and participant observation fieldnotes need something “more” to make it engaging on stage. Perhaps we are too creative, and our directorial and scenographic training muddy the naturalistic waters. But this is not a liability; it is an advantage. When the vast repertoire of theatrical forms, genres, styles, and media are applied to the staging of social science research, interesting presentational and representational hybrids emerge.

**ASSERTION 2: An ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists’ application of available and new theatrical forms, genres, styles, and media onto the ethnodramatic play script and its production.**

Playwrights don’t “write” ethnodramas, they *adapt* them—both in terms of content and theatricality. I was fortunate as a graduate student to take a playwriting course from the late theatre for youth author, Aurand Harris. I find that several of the principles he taught us are still prominent in my own ethnodramatic play scripts and in those of others. One of the basic approaches to his writing was that each adaptation should be structured with a stylistic theatrical frame. For example, *A Toby Show* is

the Cinderella story, but integrates elements of the Chautauqua, Vaudeville, and early twentieth century Toby theatre in the United States. *Androcles and the Lion* is an adaptation of Aesop's fable, but incorporates characters and elements from the commedia dell'arte along with conventions of the musical. In contemporary ethnodramas, *The Laramie Project* simulates the documentary with reminiscences of story theatre, while *The Exonerated* (on stage) adopts the traditional conventions of reader's theatre. In script form, Anna Deavere Smith's one-woman plays are not structured as narrative monologues but as suites of poetic verse.

Ethnotheatrical artists don't necessarily heighten or skew reality through their imaginative writing and staging, but they seem to endow their productions with aesthetic forms that create hybrids of performative ontologies. The late qualitative researchers Miles and Huberman (1994) wrote that investigators should "think display" when it comes to organizing and analyzing their data. Theatre artists, by default, are well trained to "think display" on stage; and thus our ethnodramatic productions are not just presentational and representational exhibitions, they are also analytic acts. Ethnodramas are not "play scripts" in the traditional sense, but essentialized fieldwork reformatted in performative data displays. Reality on stage now seems to acquire not a reductive but an exponential quality.

For example, at the NYU Forum, Christina Marín's production of José Casas's *14* provided a staged testimonio by Latino/as and Whites. Joseph Salvatore's *An Teorainn/Edge* wove interview excerpts with evocative dance-drama. Traditional storytelling sometimes reminiscent of stand-up comedy structured the women's performances in Dana Edell's *ViBe Theatre Experience* and Nan Smithner's *Women's Project*. Philip Taylor's *Beautiful Menaced Child* was plotted with Boalian forms, while Brad Vincent's *The Silence at School* maintained the elegance of reader's theatre with accompanying media projections. Stephen DiMenna's youth theatre production of *Uncensored 2006* gave us the authentic stories of adolescents' experiences in the form of an ensemble revue (with a dash of sketch comedy thrown in). There were no "neutral" productions at the NYU Forum. To freely adapt Richard Schechner's oft-quoted phrases, the ethnotheatrical presentations were "restored behavior" and "not-not-real."

The aesthetic possibilities of ethnotheatre are extended further if we can make our productions even more interdisciplinary. A contemporary

music equivalent to ethnodrama is Steve Reich's composition, *Different Trains*. Tape-recorded rhythmic phrases and speech melodies from interviews with his childhood governess, a retired Pullman porter, and Holocaust survivors about trains, in America, and Europe during World War II not only served as the inspiration for the music but are also woven into the music itself. Interview excerpts in *Different Trains* include such phrases as: "from Chicago to New York," "one of the fastest trains," and "they tattooed a number on our arm." Reich explains, "I selected small speech samples that are more or less clearly pitched and then notated them as accurately as possible in musical notation.... The piece thus presents both a documentary and a musical reality... that I expect will lead to a new kind of documentary music video theater in the not too distant future" (Reich, 1989, n.p.). Musicals like *Working* and *A Chorus Line* contain some authentic passages of interview text. Might it be possible in the not too distant future to create ethnodramatic oratorio or opera?

When I first began writing ethnodramas, I was loathe to tinker too freely with the authentic words and voices of participants. I felt that theatre's artistic power to creatively *present* would negate attempts to authentically represent. But after reading and/or viewing well over 250 scripts and productions I classify as ethnodramatic, I have returned and applied to ethnotheatre my adopted pragmatic advice for selecting appropriate qualitative data analytic strategies: "Whatever works." I notice that most of the ethnodramas in my bibliography have been written in such diverse dramatic and theatrical forms as the revue, rant, radio drama, performance art, chamber theatre, poetry, expressionism, debate, digital storytelling, participation theatre, simulated lecture, and ritual. It's a bit ironic that "slice of life" scripts about human social reality, constructed with the conventions of realism or naturalism, are actually quite few in number. The ethical conundrum for ethnodramatists to maintain fidelity to our transcripts and fieldnotes should not paralyze us from thinking imaginatively about a research study's staging potential. But ethnotheatrical artists should also acknowledge that, like all rigorous researchers, we have an obligation to our participants and audiences to balance creativity with credibility and trustworthiness.

### **ASSERTION 3: An ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists' integrity to truthfulness as well as truth.**

I find myself applying a quantitative measure to assess whether a play's qualitative background research and dramatization merit its classification as an ethnodrama (as I define it). A recent graduate student production at Arizona State University used interview transcripts of troubled adolescents in a group home as a foundation for devising an original work about their lives. I eagerly awaited and attended the performance, assuming that this was to be a new ethnodramatic work. Though the production was well mounted and realistically performed by the university actors, I sensed unauthentic and implausible dialogue throughout the play. The next day I asked the student playwright, "What percentage of your script contained the actual words said by teenagers the company interviewed and observed?" After a few seconds of reflection he responded, "About forty percent." Therefore, I classified the production as an exemplar of devised theatre that addressed important social issues about youth, but it was not ethnotheatrical.

*Autoethnography* aside, how much authenticity is necessary for a script to be labeled ethnodramatic? How "real" should reality theatre be? Though abhorrent to some, what percentage of a script's monologue, dialogue, and action should consist of actual excerpts from transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents to justify its classification as an ethnodrama? Screenwriter Peter Morgan (2007) notes that when it comes to historic fiction, and he lacks the necessary information about what is true, the challenge for him is to write what appears to be truthful. (As a side note, I've always found it fascinating that the word "hypocrite" comes from the Greek *hypokritēs*, meaning "actor on the stage.")

I admittedly and unapologetically use a subjective level of significance of sorts, balanced with my personal response to the play or production, to assess whether a play is an ethnodrama. A playwright can tell me that his or her script consists of approximately ninety percent verbatim extracts from qualitative data, and I will comfortably label the play ethnodramatic. Anything less than that is considered on a case-by-case basis. I have encountered several exceptions to my rule, and have even been fooled on occasion, so I reserve the right to change this metric and method in the future as the need arises. UK ethnodramatist Alecky Blythe refers to this instinctive gauge as her "truthometer" (Hammond & Steward, 2008, p. 96).

Case in point: Some are taken aback when they see Paul

Greengrass's (2006a, 2006b) *United 93* in my bibliography of cinematic ethnodramas. (Several film critics erroneously labeled this work a "docudrama.") Half the film portrays the action of the doomed flight inside the airplane on 9/11. How can any of us know with unquestionable certainty what actually happened on board to the passengers, crew, and hijackers, and what they actually said and did before the tragic outcome? I was persuaded by Greengrass's director's commentary that accompanies the film on DVD. On the soundtrack, he notes how several of the actual people who were involved with air traffic control and operations on September 11, 2001 were cast to portray themselves in *United 93*. *The 9/11 Commission Report* was used as a "bible," he says, to faithfully reconstruct the real-time events depicted in the film. Over one hundred interviews with surviving family members, transcripts of frantic phone calls by passengers and crew, and two weeks of intensive rehearsals by the director and cast to create a sense of "plausible truth" (Greengrass, 2006b, p. 101) were used as sources for reconstructing the monologue, dialogue, and action. Meticulously researched screenplay notwithstanding, the emotional power of the film itself, the frightening sense of reality captured by the actors' naturalistic performances, and the director's stark but compassionate vision, lead me to conclude that *United 93* is one of the finest, if not the best, ethnodramas ever produced.

A second case in point: One of the most stunning moments for me as an instructor occurred in my Ethnodrama and Ethnotheatre class when we dramatized passages from Michael V. Angrosino's (1994) classic article, "On the Bus with Vonnie Lee." This case study profiles a developmentally disabled adult raised in the southern United States with a passion for riding the city bus. We experimented with Victor Turner's premise that, to get into the skin of our participants, we needed to act out their stories—studio exercises we labeled, "staging culture."

Angrosino's article begins with a brief descriptive sketch of Vonnie Lee's childhood, one sadly troubled with an alcoholic mother engaged with countless physically and sexually abusive boyfriends. We cast five students in class to portray: Vonnie Lee, his two sisters, their mother, and one of the abusive men in their lives. The improvisation began with all actors framed to let their assigned characters ("poor white trash—real crackers," according to Vonnie Lee) take them in directions they felt appropriate as they improvised. The scene was set in the family's home



and, after some initiating action, transitioned to discomfort at the harsh dialogue directed by the adults toward the children, which later escalated to the mother yelling drunkenly and obscenely at Vonnie Lee as the boyfriend inappropriately fondled one of the young sisters. The improvisation reached such a peak of violence that the actors and some of the audience members felt an urgent need to stop the exercise. Upon reflection and processing, the actors and some of their classmates realized that it was not just the cruelty portrayed and experienced by the characters that compelled the students to break out of role, but the stunning realization that they had captured moments that were all too plausible and all too truthful for their comfort.

Victor Turner was right.

**ASSERTION 4: An ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists' capacities for thinking theatrically as well as ethnographically.**

I find that the advice I offered to ethnodramatists a few years ago in my edited collection, *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (Saldaña, 2005) still holds true: "Stop thinking like a social scientist and start thinking like an artist" (p. 33). I've been privileged to read play script drafts submitted to me by playwrights across North America these past few years for feedback and revision recommendations. A few of those scripts provide opportunities to discuss how our initial assumptions about writing ethnodrama might steer us in misleading directions.

One play attempted to "realistically" reconstruct the talk among abused women in a group support session, who were also in rehearsal for a play about their personal experiences. My initial response as a reader was that the dialogue exchanged between them seemed artificial, with a contrived framework for justifying a theatrical presentation. I recommended that the writer "think theatrically" (Wright, 1997) rather than ethnographically, and to consider how the works of African American playwright Ntozake Shange might be used as inspirational models for reconceptualizing the play. La'Ketta Caldwell's revised draft of *Unclothed* now presents the haunting stories and healing of women who have been emotionally, physically, and sexually abused in a monologic, ceremonial, and dynamic drama. Here is a playwright who trusted her artistic impulses and created a heart-wrenching play with theatricality yet authenticity—a quality I label "ethnodramatic

validity” (Saldaña, 2005, p. 32).

Another writer felt compelled to include government statistics related to the social issues he addressed in his play. The numbers were delivered throughout the text by a “chorus” of men, but this device interrupted the rather nice flows of action that had been developed thus far in his ethnodramatic comedy-drama. I initially advised the playwright to edit these didactic scenes from his draft since I was more concerned with his characters than the “stats.” In discussion, we both acknowledged that the facts about gay population demographics, HIV/AIDS, and other social issues were compelling for traditional research articles but not for a play. In other words, it was good science, but not good drama.

Nevertheless, we felt that the importance of those facts merited audience education and a place in the script—but where and how? We brainstormed ideas and serendipitously hit upon the idea of making the obvious obvious. In the revision, playwright Carlos Manuel, himself a character in the play as the ethnographer, suddenly stops the action of *Vaqueeros*, which portrays the lives of closeted gay Latinos, and presents the statistics as a campy PowerPoint slide presentation with accompanying hard-copy handouts for the audience (“Here, take one and pass ‘em on down”). The lesson learned was that important facts—even descriptive statistics—can be delivered humorously and theatrically. Whatever works...

**ASSERTION 5: An ethnotheatre aesthetic emerges from theatre artists’ production and publication of research and creative activity in the genre to advance the field and to encourage dialogue among its practitioners.**

Our once-labeled “experimental” and “alternative” (read: marginalized) ethnotheatrical work has now earned a respected place in the contemporary canon of research methodologies. “Ethnodrama” and even “Theatre of the Oppressed” appear as entries in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Given, 2008). Sage Publications has also produced its *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* (Knowles & Cole, 2008), which includes chapters on ethnodrama plus other theatrical forms such as reader’s theatre,

film/video, and community-based presentations. And, of course, Doug Wright's (2004) one-man tour-de-force, *I Am My Own Wife*, accelerated the genre to award-winning status with the play's Drama Desk and Tony Awards and Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Quality ethnodramas are still being produced and published, ranging from the rigorously researched yet poignant narratives of women with HIV (Sandelowski, et al., 2006), to the multiple performance projects about Hurricane Katrina's aftermath in Louisiana and Mississippi (e.g., Marks & Westmoreland, 2006), to the controversial Wilton, Connecticut High School theatre production of *Voices in Conflict* (Dickinson, 2008). According to national news coverage in March 2007, the latter was censored and cancelled by the school's principal for presenting an imbalanced, negative view of the war in Iraq—even though the script derives from the actual writings and voices of American soldiers and others directly impacted by the war. The production company received unprecedented nation-wide artistic, political, and financial support to stage the play off-campus.

I am uncertain whether ethnotheatre will hold continued promise as a legitimate research-based art form with a potential trajectory of increasing validity and thus full acceptance in education and the social sciences; whether its verbatim theatre forms will continue to produce moderately successful commercial/professional ventures by such playwrights as Robin Soans (2004, 2005, 2007); or whether it is merely a current "trend" in the history of theatre that may one day be looked back on as an amusing but outdated genre. But reality will never go out of style, correct? It may simply be theatre's presentation and representation of it that will continue to evolve.

The current trends in qualitative inquiry and theatre for social change have produced not only a body of ethnodramatic work but ethnodramatic "social work." Mienczakowski's (1995) and Denzin's (2003) oft-cited publications promote an ethnodramatic mission that is primarily critical, political, moral, and emancipatory. Certainly, well-crafted ethnotheatrical productions can accomplish these admirable goals without didacticism and heavy-handedness. But as an individual reader and audience member of ethnodrama I am also searching for things I didn't know before, for new knowledge about specific cultural groups, for insight and revelation about me, not just the generic human condition.

I search for significant trivia, not just big ideas. I search for artful

moments, not just activism. And every time I go to the theatre I search for entertainment, not just meaning. Ethnodramatists should acknowledge that their diverse audience members have multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas as they attend and attend to the ethnotheatrical event. 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 *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” (Saldaña, 2005, p. 14, emphasis in original).

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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