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A Plenary Conversation

PATRICIA LEAVY with **JOE SALVATORE**

Edited by Joe Salvatore with transcription assistance from Cassie Holzum

The Forum on Ethnodrama sponsored by New York University's Program in Educational Theatre opened on Friday, April 21, 2017, with a plenary session featuring Dr. Patricia Leavy, best-selling author, book series creator and editor, and internationally recognized leader in arts-based and qualitative research. Dr. Leavy joined forum chair Joe Salvatore for a dialogue that covered her origins as a sociologist and arts-based researcher, her thoughts on terminology, aesthetics, and ethics, and her commitment to engaging and impactful scholarship in troubling times. These are edited excerpts from their conversation that took place in the Loewe Theatre at NYU.

Joe Salvatore: So we said that we would do this as a discussion, right? Which is exciting because that's kind of what we do.

Patricia Leavy: Because we don't know what's going to happen.

JS: Right, exactly. Dangerous and uncertain. I think it makes perfect sense to begin with how you have arrived where you are in this moment as an arts-based researcher.

PL: I think the question people often ask is how did a sociologist end up in the world of arts and always in rooms with artists? I have to start in my childhood before I can sort of get to academia. I grew up immersed in the arts and loving the arts from a very young age. My mother was a painter, and she was very involved in the art scene in New York in the late 70s and early to mid-80s when the big pop movement was happening, so we were always going to art gallery openings and traveling from Boston to New York to see art shows. I started ballet classes when I was five years old and took ballet for fourteen years. I loved movies. I would take my meager allowance, and I would always save it to go to the movies and get popcorn and that sort of thing. And I loved ballet so much, my mother bought season tickets to the Boston Ballet. I probably had season tickets to the Boston Ballet for about thirty years of my life. So the arts from a very young age were an enormous part of my life, and I realized recently that whenever I'd go to a show with my parents—whether it was a concert, a dance performance, a movie—I would always get in trouble because I would always turn around to watch the audience at all the big moments. My father would literally poke me in the arm and say that I was looking the wrong way. I went and saw *Swan Lake* about two months ago—I've probably seen the ballet between fifteen and twenty times—and it occurred to me that I have never seen the Black Swan's full piroutté because I always turned to see the audience. I've been doing it my whole life. So not only did I love the arts, but I loved watching people consume art, enjoying art, being moved by art.

In high school, I became passionate about theatre for two reasons. One is I have a learning disorder, and so reading was extremely challenging for me when I was growing up—it's still challenging but less so—and I found that reading plays was easier than reading novels. Partly because of the way they're formatted, and partly because it's mostly dialogue. They were just a

lot easier for me to follow, so I started reading plays a lot in high school, and I actually did my senior thesis on a play—Arthur Miller's *The Price*, which I just saw [here in New York] two nights ago and remembered why I loved it so much. It was something that I was able to read. I also loved being involved in theatre, so I joined a theatre company, and I was in that for a few years while I was in high school. I actually auditioned as a theatre major for colleges, and I think the only reason I went to college was because of theatre. School had been incredibly difficult for me my whole life. I did not enjoy school, but I loved theatre and that got me into college. Ultimately, I ended up changing my major to sociology, and I went on and eventually got a PhD in sociology and became an academic.

When you become a sociologist, I think there is this thing where you want to do something positive in the world. Sociology is supposed to have some sort of impact in the world, which is why I chose it. When I got to academia, I had two horrifying realizations—one of which is that most academic writing is just god awful. My own included. I was writing articles that I didn't want to read. My favorite quote of all time is, "Hell is sitting on a hot stone and reading your own scientific publications." Erik Ursin, a biologist, said that, and I think it's pretty much spot on. So it occurred to me that a lot of academic writing, particularly journal articles, sort of lacks the qualities of good writing, of engaging writing, and I was now a part of this process of writing things that were not terribly engaging. I also realized that it didn't really matter that the writing wasn't good because nobody was going to read it anyway. The average academic article has an audience of 3-8 readers. I mean really stop and ponder that number. 3-8 readers. You could spend years doing the research and working on an article. I think the 3-8 is grossly overestimated because they count the author and the editor among the 3-8, so you get credit for reading your own article. That's how desperate they are to say that anybody read it. Beyond that, you can download an article, cite an article, without having read the article. I've certainly done that many times; read the abstract for a citation to advance your own research agenda in an article that nobody else is going to read. So as somebody who was always interested in audiences and the issue of audience and how we consume knowledge, it was very disheartening and heartbreaking to realize that I was suddenly in this field where I love the work, but people didn't seem to be thinking about audience. That's when I learned about arts-based research. I didn't even know the term "arts-based research." I still have folders of articles I had

collected that I called “creative methods” because I didn’t really know what they were. I found some articles by Johnny Saldaña and others, and it made sense to me. I thought, “Okay, this is something that makes sense because we can take our work and we can think about audience because artists create for others. They are always thinking about audience implicitly or explicitly.” That’s what led me to arts-based research.

JS: So you mentioned that you saw *The Price* two nights ago, and it’s been an interesting moment to be holding this forum on ethnodrama in New York because we’ve had a season of work that I think we could classify as ethnodrama. Lynn Nottage’s play *Sweat*, largely based on interviews that she and the director conducted, just won the Pulitzer. We have *Indecent* by Paula Vogel, which includes trial transcripts from the *God of Vengeance* indecency trial. Anna Deavere Smith had a new piece this year, *Notes from the Field*. There’s a musical that’s making a giant splash—*Come from Away*—based on the experiences of people on 9/11 who were rerouted to this small town in Newfoundland. So there’s actually a lot of commercial theatre that’s happening that could be classified as ethnodrama, but what I find is that artists who identify first and foremost as theatre makers don’t use that term. I’m curious what your thoughts are about terminology and ways to either bridge those gaps, or is there a gap, or why we use different terms depending on where we are making our work?

PL: I was thinking about this when I saw *The Price* the other night, which I’ve seen many times before, and it’s probably the play I know best because I read it so much in high school. When I was young, I was so attracted to Arthur Miller’s plays, and then I became a sociologist. I look at his plays now, and I think his plays are sociology. They are social commentary like the other more recent examples you mentioned before. So I would say two things. First, I think the work that those in the theatre arts and those in the arts in general do and what researchers do are actually very similar in a lot of ways. So yes, we have different tools in our tool boxes, and so too we have a different perspective we’re coming at things, but we’re trying to do similar things. We’re trying to illuminate something about the human experience. We’re trying to generate meanings. We’re trying to produce insight into some phenomenon, and it takes a lot of research in order to put on a play that will resonate, that will be believable, that will seem like the real world. When you’re doing research, you have to find ways to make it resonate. So these

things are similar in a lot of ways.

I've spoken to so many different groups over the years, from neuroscientists to artists to psychologists to people in many different fields. And when you get past the terms, everybody sort of agrees "Yeah, you know you're doing similar things. We're coming at it from a different vantage point, and we might have a different goal, but we are doing similar things." But then when you get into the terminology, it's like a turf thing almost. Especially in academia. I use the term "arts-based research" simply because I wanted to use a term that was already legitimated in the field. It probably wouldn't be the term I would personally create, but it was legitimated so I used it. But there are more than twenty-five terms people use to replace "arts-based research," and the same is true with ethnodrama. In academia people have a lot of incentive to create something that's original, to coin some sort of term, to have their name and identity linked with some sort of term or concept. So I think you get a plethora of terms that might be slightly different from each other, but they're more or less talking about the same things. I think you have less of that in the arts themselves, and so you encounter less of that. I also think that in academia, one of the reasons we're doing this kind of work is to push against the norm. I think if you say that you are writing a play, that doesn't have the scholarly cachet of saying, "I'm writing an ethnodrama." If you are going against a system that is built based around citations and journal articles, and you're already going upstream, you need to do those kinds of things. I think that academics have also created a plethora of terms to make the work we're doing sound more scholarly even though it is anyway. I think what Arthur Miller does is scholarly anyway, but if we don't give it some sort of academic sounding term, I think it's very difficult. Particularly if you're a graduate student and you're trying to do something for your thesis. How are you going to get past a committee that doesn't understand that art making can be a part of the research process?

JS: Along with thinking about terminology and moving in and out of these different contexts, we start to think about aesthetics and aesthetic presentation. And I think in the work of the ethnodramatist there are also lots of questions about ethics because we're dealing with real people's stories. Can you talk about the interplay of aesthetics and ethics in the creation and presentation of an ethnodrama and with arts-based research in general?

PL: First, what I would do is point out what I think the tension is. And to do that, I would draw on Johnny Saldaña's work because he's written really beautifully about this, talking about how as a researcher, you are supposed to have fidelity to the data. Whereas as an artist, you need to focus on the juicy stuff to make your piece of art engaging so that it does work as an aesthetically enjoyable piece of art. I do think that there is this tension that exists between how you balance those two worlds if you're doing ethnodrama or if you're doing sociological fiction or if you're doing something that's explicitly combining our research and our artistic point of view. For me, these things come together through the concept of truthfulness. I think it's all about truthfulness. I think that's what we're really trying to get at. When we talk about fidelity to the data, we're trying to get at something that's truthful. It's not the truth, it's not the truth with a capital T, but it's something that is truthful relative to the data.

We've talked about why aesthetics are important. Genuine craft and the art form are important so that it will resonate with audiences. That is the reason, which again is linked to truthfulness. So I do see that there is this tension, but I think where they come together is that we use the data we have in honest ways bearing in mind important things like protecting people's anonymity if that's what we promised to do or whatever it might be, whatever the constraints that we've gotten ourselves into or that we just feel are right at that time because it can be unfolding and evolving. We need to pay attention to that, but we also need to pay attention to the fact that the better piece of art it is, the more people engage with it, the more memorable it will be the more likely we are to get them thinking about what we want them thinking about. So it all comes together in this—is it truthful? It doesn't mean this person said that in this interview in this way. That's not how I think of being honest. Are we using artistic devices to communicate something that is honest and truthful so that it will resonate with people? That's how I think about it and how I reconcile those concepts.

JS: And as you think through the question of ethics, and as someone who works in fiction, when you're writing, how do you think about the ethics of that storytelling?

PL: In some ways the first novel that I wrote—the first piece of fiction I wrote—which is loosely based on my interview research—truly happened

by accident. In retrospect, I'm so glad because it was a completely organic process. I never intended to write a novel. I was bored. I was on sabbatical, and I had just laid on the couch and watched TV and ate donuts for a week like you do when you're on sabbatical, and then I thought, "Eventually you're supposed to do something." So I started doing something, and it was something that was boring and not engaging to me, and I thought "I'm going to do a little creative writing." I really thought, "Maybe I'll write a poem." Then I thought. "Maybe a short story." Twenty pages into it, my partner came home that night and said, "What did you do?" I said, "I wrote." And he said, "What did you write?" I said, "Honestly, I don't know. I thought it might be a short story, but it's like twenty pages, and there are some characters I haven't introduced yet."

So he read it the next day, and he said, "You should write a novel." And I did. It was really a personal release. It was frustration I had felt over the years from things I learned in my interviews and my classes that I had nowhere to place. I had no intention of publishing it, truthfully, until it was done. I didn't even tell anybody about it. It was just sort of an exercise, and that was very freeing because I didn't have to ask myself these big questions. I didn't draw directly on anybody's individual words; it was all thematic. Since then, more books in and thinking about it, collecting more interviews specifically knowing they'd be used in this fictionalizing way, I try to get at themes that come up in people's interviews, and I put them in fictional scenarios. I take their experiences and their feelings about their experiences, and I create scenarios in which these things might have happened or could have happened. It's amazing how much mundane stuff you can weave into fiction that is important because it does mirror real life. For example, in my interviews over the years with women about body image issues, relationship issues, etc., I ask a lot of mundane questions about things they eat, exercise habits, daily habits, and a whole range of things, and I've woven all of those things into my novels. So in one of my novels in which the protagonist has very low self-esteem and is always depressed and she feels bad about the way she looks, every food item mentioned in the book is something that came up in dozens of interviews where women said, "You know I eat this and then I feel badly." So I've taken all these mundane things and they've become the backdrop of a character's life, and that's what my process for doing that is like.

JS: So it's kind of like creating composite characters from all of these details?

PL: Exactly. When I wrote the first novel, I never intended to do it, so when I had interviewed people over the years, of course I got permission to publish, but I never said, "Can I fictionalize your experience?" It just never occurred to me that I was going to. Now I ask people if I can publish their work in ways that I have no intention of doing just in case, because now I know I don't know what I'm going to want to do in a year or five years or ten years. Every art form, things I've never used, that I have no skill in, websites, you name it. I ask for explicit permission—"Is it okay if I use these forms?" Most of which I probably will never do.

JS: I want to ask you about assessment. How do you think about assessing the quality of a piece of arts-based research?

PL: I think there is a long list of evaluative criteria, and we can discuss some of them, and I've written about them before. In the first edition of *Method Meets Art*, I didn't really write about evaluation. It was the number one question I got asked, so in the second edition there's a whole chapter. We can talk about some of the things, but for me it all comes down to one primary thing—how is this useful? In what way is this useful? For what use is this? Of what use is this? It's about usefulness, and that can mean many different things in different contexts, but what is this good for? And that doesn't mean we don't value craft and rigor, and we all need to learn the disciplines that we're working in, and that's important. The better the piece of art you make will ultimately probably have a greater impact and will resonate more. All that being said, I think that people can get very discouraged, especially students, from trying out these kinds of methods if there's so much attention placed on "Is it great art?" I mean even in the art world, very few people can live up to the "Is it great art?" It's so subjective.

I went to the MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) two days ago because I'm here in New York, and there was an exhibit of women's art, which I'm always thrilled to see because, as you know if you go to museums, it is predominantly the work of white men that we find in those walls. I was very excited to see this exhibit, and because it's so infrequent, it drew attention to everything else around it and what and who has been deemed great.

These are really dangerous categories because, historically, and I would say through the present, that which has been deemed great art is art by white men, and so everybody else is sort of excluded from that in every genre of art. Yes, there are exceptions the same way if we're talking about race in this country and somebody says, "Barack Obama was president." Well yeah, so what? That doesn't mean that we don't have racism in this country. It's the same thing in the arts. It's one of the reasons I'm very reluctant to say each [piece of arts-based research] should be great art. Not only because it discourages people from trying these methods, but because the whole idea of what is great art has been constructed in a way that is not inclusive. So I think it's really important to ask what is the value or the use? In what way is that piece of art useful? Did it jar a relevant audience into thinking about something differently? Did it produce insights into something? Did it unsettle stereotypes? Did it just teach some kids something that they remembered a week out, five weeks out, five months out versus studying something for a task that they don't remember two days later? If you're looking at audience for any kind of piece of art whether it's an ethnodrama or something else, there's always audiences you're intending to reach. The stakeholders that are linked to your topic. The reason that I've written novels in this sort of chick lit format is because my key audience was women in their twenties and thirties, like the women I had interviewed, and I wanted women outside of academia in that age range to have access to this work. I tried to use a genre that for some is appealing, and then subvert that genre.

There are other criteria you can go to. You can look at somebody's methodology. You can look at the link between their research question, if they have a research question, and what they did, and the fit between those things. You can look at the aesthetic quality. If it's something like an ethnodrama, you can get audience feedback. There are so many different ways from a comment card to a survey to doing focus groups or a debriefing after a show. From that, you can assess: "These were my goals and what I wanted them to learn and what I wished to communicate. How closely to that did I come? Did I reach those goals? In what ways did I and in what ways didn't I?" Each art form is different and is going to have to be evaluated in a slightly different way, but at the end of the day, the number one thing I ask is "How was it of value?"

JS: So given the complexity of the world that we're living in right now, what

power do you think we have as arts-based researchers and ethnodramatists to create and/or catalyze change or awareness?

PL: I will start by saying that after the election, the very first thing I did once I stopped crying and I crawled out of bed and I put fresh clothes on, my first act of resistance was changing my occupation across my social media to artist. That is now my occupation on social media, and that was my first act of resistance for two reasons. One, in difficult times they always come after the artists. So it was clear to me that was coming. And, two, I think artists are incredibly powerful. I think that we can see that power more in challenging times, and that is the silver lining of a challenging time is it will produce brilliant art, it will produce important art, enduring art because that's when artists really have to rise, and we have to use our tools to rise. I think that the arts can jar people into thinking and seeing differently. In ways that nothing else can. I really mean that in a serious and deep way.

One of the things I'm interested in because I am an absolute nerd at heart is the neuroscience of creativity, so I've become obsessed over the last few years and trying to read as much I can, which is challenging for me. I'm learning as much as I can about the neuroscience of creativity and the field of literary neuroscience in particular, because I write novels and I like to read plays and all of that. The short version is that there is a significant amount of research that shows our brains behave differently when we are consuming literature or art than when we're consuming other things. For example, if we are immersed in reading a novel, it activates parts of our brain that researchers had no idea were activated when we're reading including those that are involved in touch. When people are really immersed in a novel, they feel like they are part of that world. You feel like you know these characters, and you are in their apartment, and you are a part of this world. Well, there's actually a physiological basis for that. There is actually something physiologically happening to us when we engage with fiction versus nonfiction. Researchers have also found that the effects last longer. There is heightened activity in these parts of our brains for days after reading a novel.

Two years ago, I attended the Salzburg Global Seminar, which is something in Austria where they invite fifty people to go for a week. It's like getting the golden ticket in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I still don't know how I

got invited to this thing, but it was on the neuroscience of creativity, and half the people there were world famous neuroscientists from around the world. The other half were accomplished artists from different genres. Then there were random people—like me and a woman from NPR. The fifty people in that room at that time had tens of millions in active grant money to study these things, so there is a lot of money being put into this. We looked at brain scans of somebody who's a novice writing a poem versus an experienced poet writing a poem. We looked at these kinds of things, and it was just amazing because it confirmed what so many of us know and what I knew from childhood. What I knew when I was five years old in a movie theatre being poked by my father because I was facing the wrong way was that when people are experiencing art, you can literally see something happening to them. I've never seen that watching anyone read an academic journal article. That's more like watching someone being lulled into a slow coma.

There is something real that happens when people consume art that they are engaged in or that they are troubled by, that they are challenged by. Engaged doesn't have to mean they love it, but they are in some way engaged with it. There is a physiological basis for that, so it just confirms to me what I've already known: the arts are incredibly powerful. This is a way that we can create self-awareness and social reflection. You can jar people into seeing things differently, into thinking about things differently. Artists can present the world as it is and force people to see it in a way that maybe they haven't, and they can imagine how the world might be. I really think that those are the two things that artists in all genres attempt to do, and I think those are the two things that are needed in difficult times.

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Patricia Leavy, Ph.D., is an independent scholar and bestselling author (formerly Associate Professor of Sociology, Chair of Sociology & Criminology, and Founding Director of Gender Studies at Stonehill College

in Massachusetts). She has published over twenty-five books, earning commercial and critical success in both fiction and nonfiction, and her work has been translated into numerous languages. Her recent titles include *Research Design*, *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, *Method Meets Art*, *Fiction as Research Practice*, *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*, *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, and the bestselling novels *Spark*, *Blue*, *American Circumstance*, and *Low-Fat Love*. She is also series creator and editor for eight book series with Oxford University Press and Brill/Sense, cofounder and co-editor-in-chief of *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, and a blogger. In addition to receiving numerous accolades for her books, she has received career awards from the New England Sociological Association, the American Creativity Association, the American Educational Research Association, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, and the National Art Education Association. In 2016 Mogul, a global women's empowerment network, named her an "Influencer." In 2018, she was honored by the National Women's Hall of Fame and the State University of New York at New Paltz established the "Patricia Leavy Award for Art and Social Justice."