

## **The Ethno-Actor: Encompassing the Intricacies and Challenges of Character Creation in Ethnotheatre<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article addresses a current gap in the research of ethnotheatre productions, specifically involving the role of the actor. Actor coaching and character creation varies so vastly from traditional theatre that the role of the actor is changed. The author proposes a new term to encapsulate the role: ethno-actor. The ethno-actor is challenged to create a portrayal that maintains the dignity of and respect for the interviewee while maintaining room for new discovery of knowledge and understanding. The ethno-actor is charged with the ability to have empathy for the person/role they perform in order to truthfully render the performance of the individual. The main difference between traditional*

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: The following article is adapted from my unpublished Master's thesis entitled *The Space Between Us All: The Performance of Dissociation in the Drama Therapy Relationship*, completed in partial fulfilment of my Master of Arts degree in drama therapy at NYU Steinhardt.

*acting and ethno-acting is that more attention is paid to ethical considerations, aesthetic challenges, and empathy-based creation (faithful rendering) throughout the character creation process.*

## INTRODUCTION

Before I turned my interest and career toward a helping profession, I worked as an actor. My experience in the performance realm ranged from musicals to independent films to Shakespearean dramas and back again. I stretched myself to perform in period pieces, learned complicated stage combat routines, and experimented with semi-improvisational new works. Each form of performance came with its own challenges and rewards, most of which were very obvious and manageable. In Anthony Clarvoe's *Ambition Facing West*, where I acted as an immigrant from Croatia in the 1940s, I worked with a dialect coach to master the nuances of the speech pattern. When I was the fight captain for a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, I reviewed every step in the fight, learning the detailed movements so I could better aid the combatants and understand the impetus behind each physical beat in the battle. In both of these instances it was easy to identify how I would need to proceed with my rehearsal and actor's work in order to deliver an adequate performance. While exciting and stimulating, these pieces offered a very different challenge from the ethnotheatrical work I eventually studied.

Although I had some limited experience in ethnodramatic work as an actor, my artistic and research interest piqued while pursuing a Master of Arts degree in Drama Therapy at New York University. There I was fortunate to be cast as a researcher-actor in Joe Salvatore's production *Towards the Fear: An Exploration of Bullying, Social Combat, and Aggression*, and then moved into my own research for my Master's thesis performance *The Space Between Us All: Playing with Dissociation*. Both of these productions were original works that utilized interviews and verbatim transcripts to build the content of the show. It was in doing this work that a new kind of challenge, one dealing with ethics, transparency, and faithful rendering, emerged, and my skills as an actress were stretched in a way they had never been stretched in traditional theatre roles. It was also through this work that I identified

what felt like a gap in the conversation around ethnotheatre productions and acting. In this article I will begin a dialogue aimed at filling that gap and encouraging continued discussion and exploration of this performance style.

## PERFORMANCE-BASED RESEARCH

It is important to understand the theoretical and historical context within which the research I have begun is grounded. Both of the projects I will reference throughout this piece fall under the category of arts-based research, and specifically nested within that term, performance-based research. Artist and researcher Shaun McNiff (2012) pointed to the “bodily and sensory knowing through the arts” (p. 10), and its usefulness in this type of research. This type of physical knowledge gained through the arts is described by psychologist, Eugene Gendlin (1981) as *felt sense*. Gendlin wrote, “A felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. [...] A bodily awareness of a situation, person, or event” (p. 32). Through the arts, this felt sense is given passage to emerge from the body and into communal understanding without necessitating traditional verbal expression (Rappaport, 2009). The exploration of the actor’s role within ethnotheatrical production was deeply rooted in physical exploration and understanding in the rehearsal process as well as the performance. It was through the taking on of role and the process of creating character that the nuances of styles, aesthetics, and ethics within the process fully emerged.

Clinical psychologist Les Todres (2007) supposed that through embodiment, it may be possible to exhume background knowledge that may not enter the room via spoken words. This place of discovering embodied information “is where being and knowing meet” (Todres, 2007, p. 20); however, Todres argued that it is not without its risks. In this view, the performer must enter a space of unknowing and remain open to all possibilities of new information. While Todres explained that this experience can be anxiety provoking, it may also be the path to new data. Instead of focusing solely on existing information or the end product of research, space is created for the emergence of new data. Drama therapist Nisha Sajjani (2012) discussed the role of improvisation in this journey and its potential to unearth new information through unrestricted and unanticipated processes by urging the

researcher to focus on process rather than product. In performance-based research, the unexpected occurrences, feelings, and relationships are frequently fertile with new data.

Irwin (2004) believed that these new discoveries are made in the shared territory between individuals in relationship. It is in this shared space that old ways of understanding can transform into new knowledge and information. Todres (2007) also pointed to this re-creation and the ability to better understand another individual's experience through an embodied reenactment. The blending of the performer's own knowledge with the embodied exploration of another person's experience creates possibility for new information. Salvatore (personal communication, May 22, 2015) would say that the actor in performance never disappears fully during this blending process, while Landy (1996) might term this experience as living the double life. I would posit that this double life becomes considerably more complicated when the character being played is not a fictional being but rather a living person.

Todres (2007) would argue that if the performer never fully disappears into role, then they are always part of observable performance. In other words, the audience sees a specific performance that is created in a specific moment and impacted by the set of people involved in the performance. This is a postmodern understanding that the information discovered is not absolute, but rather relative and subjective. The information gathered is relevant and important data in that it is shared understanding, co-created in the performance space. Just as the performer affects and is affected by the role they take on, this line of thinking asserts that the audience and performer engage in relationship as well. Through this relationship, the audience may teach and influence the performer and performance as much as they are also influenced (Irwin, 2004).

## **ETHNODRAMA/ETHNOTHEATRE**

According to researcher and theatre artist Johnny Saldaña (2005), *ethnodrama* is the play script that is written based on transcripts, interviews, journals, field notes, and other authentic sources. This script may or may not ever be performed but is in itself a presentation of the ethnographic research. *Ethnotheatre* is the dramatic production of the ethnodrama through performance. Saldaña (2011) reminds us that the

decision to present data as a script or as a performance involves consideration of how the research findings will best be communicated. Ethnodramatic scripts are not all suited for performance and aesthetic choices are important in order to deliver to the audience an emotional and entertaining experience.

The purposeful choices that go into creating a piece of ethnotheatre involve not only aesthetics but also ethics. These decisions are especially important when the piece of ethnotheatre involves the representation of individuals' personal stories or when confidentiality issues are involved. This is one area where traditional theatre and ethnotheatre can diverge because of the potentially more stringent ethical requirements of ethnographic work (Burch, Kaynan, Salvatore, & Tomasetti, 2015). However, this line becomes blurry as different writers, directors, and creative teams view their work in myriad ways.

Saldaña (2011) has researched and written extensively about the various presentations of this style of ethnographic work, having identified over 80 terms used to describe it. With this much variance in terminology, there is also variance in how people produce these works and the choices they make while presenting them to audiences. Ethnographic work may appear as therapeutic theatre, entertainment, anthropological research, or a vast array of other presentations. There is currently not one definition or definitive term for the various forms this work takes.

One form of the ethnotheatre genre involves *interview theatre* and *verbatim interview theatre*. Although it can take shape in many ways, in both processes participants are interviewed and the transcripts of these interviews are turned into a script. In verbatim interview theatre the transcriptions are used with the exact phrasing the interviewee spoke and often with their specific speech patterns, accents, and pauses. Anna Deavere Smith, a prominent solo performance artist, has done extensive work in verbatim interview theatre, bringing characters to life through the idiosyncrasies of their speech (Burch et al., 2015). The most well-known example of interview theatre is *The Laramie Project* (Tectonic Theatre Project, 2015) in which over 200 community members in Wyoming were interviewed after the tragic murder of a young gay male named Matthew Shepard. From creating characters aimed at emulating specific individuals to generating roles that are representative or interpretive of participants, the specific choices made ethically and aesthetically are

imperative in the creation process.

Salvatore (personal communication, May 22, 2015) asserted that one of the most important decisions a creative team must make in developing this type of performed research is to determine the intended audience for the production. Intent becomes key and drives the development of the script and performance. In Salvatore's work, honoring and respecting the participants and their stories is considered paramount and influences script building, coaching of the actor, and delivery of the performance. The actor coaching and character creation varies so vastly from traditional theatre that the role of actor is changed. I propose a new term, *ethno-actor*, to encapsulate the role. The *ethno-actor* is challenged to create a portrayal that maintains the dignity of and respect for the interviewee while maintaining room for new discovery of knowledge and understanding. They must be conscious in their choices to avoid caricature, misrepresentation, or falsehood in their performance. The *ethno-actor* is charged with the ability to have empathy for the person/role they perform in order to truthfully render the performance of the individual.

Adding to the complexity of the *ethno-actor's* experience is the potential for the person they embody on stage to be audience to the performance. With this possibility, empathic experiences and ethical considerations come to the forefront of the *ethno-actor's* performance. Saldaña (2011) discussed these considerations as, "the ethics of representation and presentation—in other words, the moral and authentic use of participant materials" (p. 39). While the writer of an *ethnodrama* must consider how to sculpt the play to best represent the interviewee's words, the *ethno-actor* must continue that process in the development of vocalization, physical portrayal, movement, and acting intent. Unlike traditional pieces of theatre with fictionalized characters and speech, the *ethno-actor* creates verbatim or composited presentations of real people and real stories, thus adding to the responsibility of the authentic performance.

## **ETHICAL, AESTHETIC, AND EMPATHETIC CONSIDERATIONS**

In order to better explore the usefulness of this term, I return to the two *ethnotheatre* productions cited earlier: *Towards the Fear* and *The Space Between Us All*. It was through these two creative processes that the

need for this term and the intricacies of its definition became apparent. While many aesthetic and ethical choices varied between these two unique and original productions, the experience of creating, rehearsing, and performing both shows supported the development of this new term. In both productions, I had the privilege to play the roles of writer (or co-writer/collaborator as *Towards the Fear* was developed with the ensemble) and ethno-actor. My job was to truthfully render the words of those I had interviewed and present the essence of their being. Not a task to be taken lightly.

My first thoughts about the differences between acting demands in ethnotheatre productions and traditional theatre came early in the rehearsal process for *Towards the Fear* when our director, Joe Salvatore, challenged the cast with practicing verbatim interview theatre techniques with fellow actors from the show. This exercise was aimed at not only giving us the chance to practice the interviewing format, but also to then attempt a faithful rendering of a real person through verbatim presentation. This was complicated further by the understanding that as a cast we would perform a selection from the verbatim interview for the others, including the person we had interviewed. Because the cast was in the early stages of group cohesion, having only recently met and begun rehearsals together, nervous feelings were heightened. I felt particularly anxious about the activity, given that I was a white female paired with an Asian male, and had concerns about unintentionally playing into stereotypes or misrepresenting my partner in a hurtful or offensive way. I was quickly aware of the trust required for my partner to engage in the interview and allow me to portray him. I was also quickly aware of what identifiers, privileges, and thought patterns I brought to the interview and how that would affect my performance. This felt distinctly different than previous acting opportunities both in my ability to purposefully play across gender and racial lines, and in the deep consideration and reflection needed to truthfully portray my peer.

On the flip side, I experienced a different kind of anxiety and vulnerability in the process of trusting him with my story and preparing to view myself being represented through this art form. This exchange began considerations of empathy that would be important throughout the development of the production. I was quickly attuned to how our interviewees may feel in this process and the gift of them trusting us to

represent them on stage. Experiencing both sides of the interview and performance process gave us as actors a deeper understanding of the innate vulnerability in ethnotheatre work and the responsibility the actor holds in that dyad.

As the process continued and I began the character study of the individuals I would be portraying in the show, the levels of responsibility inherent in acting in an ethnotheatre production began to emerge. Joe created individual rehearsal periods with actors in order to create space for the development and practice of the individual speech patterns and mannerisms, and it was through these meetings that I was able to discern what felt different about these rehearsals than those I had taken part in previously. I would posit that the main differences I noticed between traditional acting and ethno-acting was that more attention was paid to ethical considerations, aesthetic challenges, and empathy-based creation (faithful rendering). I would also suggest that while naming these facets individually may help us categorize the process, that in practice, these considerations blend and overlap in various ways which make them difficult to singularly identify within the process.

It is also important to note that my work has focused on verbatim interview theatre which is only one style within the larger body of work that makes up ethnotheatre. As such, the examples I use to define and qualify the term “ethno-actor” are related directly to that style and are certainly not all-inclusive or exhaustive. I believe that the term could have relevance across all ethnotheatre productions, but more research into these differences within various types of ethnotheatre work would be helpful and necessary as the term is explored for usefulness and potential growth.

To illustrate these differences, I will attempt to give examples from the actual rehearsal and performance processes. In both *Towards the Fear* and *The Space Between Us All*, the ethical considerations included determining which parts of the interviews would best represent the intent and weight of what the interviewee related. Even using a verbatim transcript, the words could potentially be altered in a way that misrepresents what the speaker intended and I, as ethno-actor, needed to be aware of my own biases in the production so as not to favor a particular voice or particular viewpoint. Working in a collaborative setting through *Towards the Fear* potentially helped keep biases in check, but as the play was a living and changing entity throughout the process,



individual ethno-actors revisited and altered the script to reflect their interpretations of the speech patterns of the people they were portraying based on their own experiences of listening to the recorded interviews. So, consistently keeping the intent of the original speaker in mind was vital to our process.

In the same vein, the physical mannerisms and vocal qualities needed to be detailed and rehearsed in a way that avoided caricature or misrepresentation. This aspect of the work blurred the lines between the ethical considerations and aesthetic challenges, as we had to ensure that our movements were realistic and not stylized or mocking while also presenting specific movements for certain characters. This was especially challenging as the cast of *Towards the Fear* purposefully played across gender, age, race/ethnicity, and nationality identifiers as mentioned earlier (Salvatore, 2016). I was cast to play the role of a broad-shouldered man, over 6 feet tall. As a 5'2" woman, Joe and I had to work to accurately portray the interviewee's movements but do so in a way that looked natural and made sense in my body, a very different body than the original speaker's. The intricacies of this work were exhausting and on-going as slight adjustments, revisions, and clarifications were made up until the opening performance to ensure that the audience viewed the most faithful rendering possible.

As an ethno-actor, the need to be self-aware and constantly reflective throughout the rehearsal as well as the performance periods felt largely different than what I had experienced as an actor in traditional plays. In traditional plays I was able to find or create mannerisms and speech patterns that grounded me in my character and could be altered as needed to help with messaging and delivery of plot points or character traits. When restricted by distinct and identified mannerisms and specific speech patterns of verbatim interviews, I had to constantly be active in containing my "character" to render it truthfully and utilize a very small number of predetermined tools for communication with the audience.

At the onset of *The Space Between Us All*, I intended to create a verbatim interview theatre piece similar to the production process in *Towards the Fear*, recreating speech patterns and mannerisms that directly represented a single individual whom I had interviewed. I realized quickly that I may have to alter my research design as I considered who I would be interviewing and for whom the production

was intended to be performed. I began to ethically consider the outcome of rendering the characters in this way. Because drama therapy is such a small field, and because I intended that community to be the audience, I wondered how I could present these voices in an accurate way while maintaining confidentiality requirements.

After careful consideration, I decided to blend characters to create a composite voice instead of isolating individual voices. Rather than having a character that only spoke the verbatim dialogue of one interviewee, I combined interviews so that one character may, at different times, have selections from several different interviewees. Saldaña (2011) explained that by using composite characters an author establishes “a fictional creation that nevertheless represents and speaks the collective realities of its original sources” (p. 17). In this way I could honor the verbatim dialogue and themes present without breaking confidentiality. This choice also meant that I would not physically represent an individual interviewee but instead create an easily identifiable but unique character profile. Once again, I blurred the lines between ethical and aesthetic considerations as I determined how best to maintain confidentiality while presenting characters through my physical body.

During the building of *The Space Between Us All* script, I deliberated carefully about each monologue combination in an attempt to capture the intent of the participant and faithfully render their experience without altering it to fit my own biases. Once I identified overlaps throughout the interviews, in both style and belief, I felt comfortable blending stories into one character. I ensured that each character was heard from at least twice throughout the play. This repetition allowed the audience the opportunity to grow accustomed to the style of the show and the presentation of the unique characters. It also allowed me, as performer, an opportunity to explore those characters fully and present a complete personality instead of delivering surface level distinctions or emotions.

It is also important to add that the blending of characters did not mean that individual voices were only bodied in particular characters. Occasionally, sections of speech would fit in with another closely related, but slightly different character, and be blended into their monologues. In this way, one character was not identifiable as a single interviewee and one individual was not necessarily connected to one particular

character. This was how I honored the participants' confidentiality while still maintaining the essence of their voice and the message of their experience. This process which started in script creation and continued through performance, involved all three components mentioned above. I was focused on building empathy for my interviewees as a way to better understand their point of view and as such represent them as faithfully as I could, I was concerned with the ethical considerations of confidentiality, and I was considering the aesthetic choices of composite characters and engaging storytelling for my audience.

In both productions, the act of moving into performance carried its own considerations, again different than what I have experienced as an actor in traditional theatre. My reflection turned to the research participants/interviewees who may come as audience members and whose interview would be witnessed in the performance. Saldaña (2011) discussed this concern and his belief that even with the best intent, the playwright cannot control how the audience will receive the material. The ethno-acting preparation up until this point supported the delivery of the performance in that I knew the ethical, aesthetic, and empathetic deliberations and choices I had formed with my director over the course of the production. This did not mean that I was relieved of any anxiety or worry about how interviewees may react to my portrayal, but I was fortified in the creation process and the care taken to faithfully render these people with dignity and respect. However, this meant that in addition to my usual actor anxieties about my performance, I was also holding the concern for the people being represented in the show and how that level of interaction with the audience might alter or affect the performance.

Important to note here is the interaction with the director and the importance of that relationship in the development of ethnotheatre roles. Similar to performing in a more traditional play, the directors I worked with helped me to shape my performance in truthful and aesthetically pleasing ways. They challenged me to finesse my character creations and pushed me to utilize my actor training to best deliver intent, action, and character development. However, they engaged with me in discussions, formulations, and reflections that mirrored the three distinctions I listed above that differentiates the ethno-actor. A full article could be committed to exploring this relationship but for the purposes of this writing, I will say that there is no way an ethno-actor could ethically,

aesthetically, or empathetically build characters and act in an ethnotheatre production without a guiding director with whom to negotiate the shared space. Collaboration with an artist who fully understands the intricacies and differences of this style of theatre and performance is paramount in order to produce an effective and engaging piece.

## **CONCLUSION**

Three years after performing in *Towards the Fear* and two years after *The Space Between Us All*, I am still ruminating on the challenges, differences, and complexities of acting in an ethnotheatre piece. Anecdotally, after that much time I am also still able to remember specific speech nuances and detailed mannerisms that comprised many of the characters I was fortunate enough to play. It is in some ways surprising to me that I am able to recall a verbatim script with the important but subtle patterns and mannerisms that are reflective of the real voices contained in the production. In other ways, this makes complete sense to me in that I, as ethno-actor, experienced, created, and delivered these productions through a method that was uniquely different than any other traditional theatre productions in which I have ever performed. The need for such specific and detailed work in ethnotheatre productions is mirrored in the need for a term that more fully encapsulates the work being done by actors in this style of performance. It is my hope that by introducing the term “ethno-actor,” more conversations and considerations of the complexities of this work can take place and as such richly enhance ethnotheatre work and production.

## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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