

## **The Evolution of Monologue as an Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Performance is social theory, or it can become so, when we use it as a means to understand social phenomena rather than merely viewing it as a spectacle or for entertainment (Brook, 1972). Theatre that explores domestic violence (Welsh, 2014), homelessness (Welsh, 2014) or the plight of refugees (Robinson, 2015) are all examples of dramatic processes becoming social theory. There are many more examples such as the work of Lloyd Jones or Pina Bausch, both of whom use experimental theatre as a means of educating, understanding and criticising society (Marshall, 2002; Pendergast, 2001). This article explores the relationship between theatre and education in three somewhat diverse contexts. Firstly, the autobiographical monologue, *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show*, describes experience in a conversational style. Experience and conversation are inevitably educational, that is, being is learning and listening is learning. Secondly, I explore the practice of monologue writing with a sample group of Australian school students on the subject of social labelling, reinforcing the idea that theatre practice is*

*education by applying it to a classroom setting. Finally, I examine a monologue writing workshop conducted with a group of teachers-in-training, revealing the potential of monologues to foster empathy among teachers and their most difficult students. Theatre then becomes a source of learning and philosophical reflection for audiences, a way of practising social learning in a school setting and increasing emotional intelligence, empathy and communication between teachers in training and their students.*

The world of performance and the life-force, or our experience of the world, from which theatre emerges is all conceived around learning. The playwright and the actor are inspired to perform because they want to articulate something about their surroundings, some knowledge. One may very well pose the question, how is it possible *not* to learn? For experience, by its very nature, is pedagogical. When we do, we either know what we do or we come to know what we do by doing it. The tennis player hits the ball as it comes to her using either an established method she knows from prior experience or comes to know through reacting to the movement of the ball. How we perceive the practice of theatre is largely dependent on our understanding of what the medium is in terms of its creation, performance and reception. I have always felt that my work as a theatre practitioner and researcher was more philosophical than entertaining (Willett, 1978, Brook, 1972), and there are numerous examples from my practice that illustrate this, such as *Barcode 30!!7 307: an exploration into domestic violence and criminal behaviour* (Welsh, 2009) or the recently performed *Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* (Welsh, 2014), perceived by many critics as an expose on the troubles of people experiencing homelessness and drug addiction. This was curious to me because the work merely described my experiences with homelessness and drug addiction, but this phenomenological fact was reinterpreted through the process of developing and presenting a theatrical performance. Thus, the performance of theatre becomes a sociological issue, as I melded the presentation of the self on stage and in social reality (Goffman, 1993). This ought to be obvious but theatre is still often viewed as escape or fantasy, with no direct relationship to other aspects of our social lives, despite examples of performance such as *The Laramie Project*, which

are specifically directed toward influencing community and social attitudes (Kaufman, 2001).

I will now refer to two recent examples from my creative practice that epitomise the performance concept I label 'real fiction'. The first is an online clip taken from my days as a homeless street poet. The intention of the clip was to capture a moment in time, of a group of strange characters, all friends, sitting around on the street, chatting about life, issues and street poetry to each other and passers-by (Welsh, 2016). This footage of actual experience was used as the foundation for the creation of a personal myth contained in the play, 'The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show'. What the footage reveals is the relationship between experience and art, the way in which artistic practice, in this case begging with poetry, is received in social reality. The practice becomes the impetus for conversation and inspires the foundations for the creation of a performance, *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show*, in which the chaotic life of the street is recognised and celebrated as the source of the work (Welsh, 2016). The conversational tone is apparent both in the first clip of the real experience and then the fictional or represented performance. The atmosphere of the street is mirrored in the stage performance, where the performers directly communicate in conversation with the audience, encouraging a loose, relaxed and somewhat random or chaotic form where the performers' job is both to encourage the audience to distract performers and then to subtly bring the conversation back to performance in much the same way a stand-up comedian does.

## **SOCIAL THEATRE & EDUCATION**

My PhD research involved applying my play-writing method to a group of secondary drama students to explore the idea of social labelling in education. Most of my work with secondary drama students creating theatrical monologues involved making them appropriate for a stage setting, enhancing the voice I heard in the monologue for the sake of an imaginary audience. The foundations existed for some compelling material. Like the process of selling poetry on the street, the monologue workshops and the outcomes in the form of student monologues constituted significant reflection on conversation and human existence in the social situation. This not only allows a context

for student learning in the drama classroom but also expands the potential of drama to act as education, building on the work of McKenna (2003) and Haseman (2006) and the tradition of Brecht.

McKenna, for example, claims that 'the embodiment of being and performance' ought to be viewed as 'ways of being and knowing' perhaps implying performance can be ontological and epistemological (McKenna, 2003, p.2). He describes his methodology as performance, that is, an action method or practice-based research. I claim, however, throughout this article and in other aspects of my practice, sitting and writing real fiction in fact involves reflecting on our personal experience and our engagement with the world. It could be considered mere journal writing, were it not for our attempt to hear the voice of an 'other' in the writing process and document this 'hearing' in a performance context, whether that be a theatre or a drama classroom.

The importance of lucid, vibrant and meaningful Arts practice in education is broadly recognised in contemporary drama education literature (Ewing, 2010). In his article exploring the potential of practice-led research, Haseman makes this assessment regarding 'reflexive research':

The situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts...are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice. These are practice-based research strategies and include: the reflective practitioner (embracing reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action); participant research; participatory research collaborative inquiry, and action research. (Haseman, 2006, p.3)

Haseman claims that theatrical '...strategies re-interpret what is meant by 'an original contribution to knowledge.' They may not 'contribute to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline', however, according to Haseman, 'they are concerned with the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies of practice distilled from the insider's understandings of action in context' (Haseman, 2006, p.3). What Haseman and others identify is the place of arts-based and practice-based research, the distinguishing features of these practices and how they fit into the rest of the research landscape.

I view any work that takes place in the theatre primarily as 'education' (Willet, 1974). As a playwright, I have argued with many

colleagues about what theatre ought to be doing and that, rather than merely entertaining, it can also seek to invite a community contemplation of the issues a play explores. This echoes the concerns of many other practitioners, including Kaufman, referred to above (Kaufman, 2001). To this end, Peter Brook's argument against the form of theatre and what he perceives as an over-emphasis on production concerns (Brook, 1972), in favour of the literary tradition of 'drama', plays with and shifts inherent power structures in contemporary theatre practice. Like Brecht, I claim that the purpose of theatre performance should be to educate 'consciously', 'suggestively' and 'descriptively' (cited in Willett, 1974, p.26).

### **I THINK THEREFORE I AM...AN EDUCATOR**

One of the outcomes of my PhD research was that the practice described therein categorized me as an 'educator' and I reacted with a little discomfort, wondering about this identity and what it meant to be classified an educator when I had never formally filled the position of teacher in a formal classroom setting. And yet, here I was, being called an educator. I should not feel insulted by this. I have nothing against educators and, like Brecht, I have often called my theatre work education (Brecht as cited by Willett, 1978).

It's just to have that identity pinned to me or have the question raised 'Why do you say you're not an educator?', it was something I couldn't move past and I could never not be an educator after that, even if I found an answer to the question. The question itself proposes its own answer. Posed in a conversational response to my thesis by a world renowned Drama Education expert, it is suggesting that theatre *is* education and therefore anyone who practises theatre is an educator. It links drama and education in the same way that Brecht did when he said his theatre sought 'to educate' but it does it with a modernist twist. It is somewhat dramatic, 'Why do YOU not call yourself an educator? You are an educator, whether you like it or not!! After-all, you have argued that theatre IS education and now you argue that you are a theatre maker. If theatre is education and you are a theatre maker, how can you not be an educator?'

The potential of monologues to educate was considered and, with an experienced education academic, applied to a teacher training setting. This involved inviting a sample group of teachers in training to

write monologues with a view to fostering empathy for those students from whom they perhaps felt disconnected or troubled by. The idea was to bring oneself into the uncomfortable space of an identified 'other', one who is 'other' to you, not you. For the participating teachers, they were asked to imagine and inhabit the narrative and physical voices of their least favourite students or those students with whom they felt a disconnect. This not only serves the function of expanding the uses of the form of writing theatrical monologues, it can also play the important social function of understanding 'others'.

In this monologue, the student teacher here explores the problems of English as a second language and the barrier to education it tends to create. Through the use of monologue, the teacher fosters an empathetic position for her student, imagining the social situation and reality for an adolescent studying English when it is not their primary language spoken at home. Considering the task, one could interpret the language barrier as symbolic of any problem that makes one feel 'different', like an 'outsider' (No Outsiders Project).

### **Monologue**

People, people, they think I'm stupid, not smart they think. He's dumb, they say. But they don't know man. They have no idea. I just can't say what I want to say the words they hard not easy to understand. In my own language, I could be a smart person, very famous. But in English not much makes sense. In my own language I could write anything I want to or I could say things to make them make sense to you.

(It is so frustrating) It makes me angry. I know what I want to speak, but nothing comes out good. My teachers, they correct me all the time.

I cannot speak good yet, Miss, give me time.

No one speaks this language at home. I have to teach my big brother but he is always busy, always tired. He gets angry too. But he is angry at all the people he goes to work with. They don't talk to him. They don't try. It is not fair, you know? We learn a whole new language and they don't even try. And they think I am stupid.

The character of the student, constructed by a teacher in training, struggles with the sense that others perceive him/her as 'stupid' but the narrative quickly turns its attention to the perceptions of the student, who declares him/herself misunderstood, 'They have no idea'. The problem is then identified as belonging to language, or the 'words' of others. Finally, as an audience, we find ourselves becoming more and more distant and alien, as the student explains an unfulfilled desire to be understood and how the familiar world of home becomes a symbol of one's own alienation, 'No-one speaks this language at home.' This denotes the student experiencing social alienation like two ends of a burning candle. He/she simultaneously identifies the world of school as foreign and, through this sense of social distance comes to know that his/her familiar world at home is in fact foreign, at least in the eyes of others and indeed in the world in which he must now survive.

This raises several questions: How is the playwright's practice in the theatre educational? How can monologue-writing, for example, be used in educational settings not just to learn about theatre and drama but to learn about the world, ourselves and others? I believe there is certainly educational value in the form of documentary theatre referred to above, where we used the street poet example, but this becomes quite another process when we contemplate the formal transformation of the theatre-making/monologue-writing process from an arts-context, that appears to educate in the manner that is referred to by Brecht and others when they explicitly state that the purpose of theatre is to consciously educate (Willett, 1978), to an educational context where artistic processes are used to educate.

The process of collecting material from the drama educational setting of the classroom and transforming it into a play can be conceived in the same way as the poet example, where material is collected from experience on the street and then written into a theatrical presentation. In the drama classroom, the context is one of learning. From the perspective of the classroom teacher or the students, the goal of participating in the activity of monologue writing is not in fact to create a monologue. The educational process is paramount and one of the selling points of the process in terms of pedagogy was how it facilitated learning about the self, in a space where participants were free to express themselves with minimal consequences. We had created a space where the distinction between what was real and what was fictional had been blurred. When

participants spoke, it may have been their own voice or it may have been one they created. In what follows, the student participant speaks of an adolescent girl and her own relationship with her body:

### **Student Monologue 7**

Student 7: My brother calls me fat. He's a li'l shit. I get in trouble for calling him a li'l shit but how much damage is done by that compared to him calling me fat?!?! It's not his fault. He's nine. He probably doesn't even know what 'fat' is. Do I really know? Why does it hurt so much, being called 'fat'? I mean do I feel fat? Sometimes. Am I really fat, though? I look in the mirror at myself sometimes and I can hear a little voice in my head saying 'Fat, fat, fat...' and then I've got him in the background right behind me and just as the imaginary voice fades out, I hear the little shit and see him smirking behind me in the mirror. So I'm not even looking at myself in the mirror. I'm looking at him! And maybe I'm seeing what he thinks!! He says I'm ugly but it doesn't matter because he's nine! He calls me lazy because I sleep til midday. But one day he will grow and so will I and I will shed my puppy fat and see myself as beautiful. He will want to know me because I'll be very cool and I'll want to know him because I'll need my brother. But what if he's gone too far for me to love him anymore? What if I just can't trust him? I get in trouble for sleeping so late. Nobody would even notice if he didn't bring it up! He knows this. He thinks it's funny. Because he's nine.

He's young, a child. But then so am I. Who isn't, anyway? When do we stop being children? Being called fat makes me feel so lonely, so lonely. I'm THE LONLIEST PERSON ON THE PLANET, WHEN HE CALLS ME FAT! He laughs. He thinks it's funny. What's funny about my loneliness?(starts squealing louder and louder and louder)Ha Ha! She's alone! HaHa! She's a monster, growing outward like an oil leak...FAT! FAT! FAT! How is that funny? I'm shouting but can anybody hear me. Does he know how much it hurts? It's only because I'm a girl that it matters . I'm already seeing myself as fatter than I'm s'posed to be. The last thing I need is the word being bleated by a nine year old sheep. But that's just it, who's he imitating?



My brother calls me stupid, old but it doesn't matter because he's nine. It can't matter. If it did matter, my brother would be more damaged than me. He's the one who's cruel. One day he will look in the mirror and he won't like what he sees. But he thinks it's a joke so it's a joke. His names don't hurt because he's nine.

It's me that does the hurting in my own thoughts about myself, not his names or labels. I remember being nine. I remember seeing my mother look at herself in the mirror, back when I was a child and she was a woman. Before I entered this, this age of uncertainty. Anyhow, she'd stare at herself and describe herself as fat, grab tiny handfuls of skin and call them flab, call herself ten-tonne Tessy when she was all skin and bones!! What I can't work out is when I turned from being nine and knowing the objective truth of what the image in the mirror looked like!

## **CONCLUSION**

The relationship between education and theatre in my practice appears to exist at its very foundations. This is apparent in the example from direct practice, explored at the opening of this article. That is, the practice is educational a long time before it enters educational contexts. However, the processes involved in collecting primary materials, whether they be from experience on the street or from educational encounters in a drama classroom, are remarkably similar and support Brecht's claim that theatre 'educates; consciously, suggestively descriptively' (Willett, 1978). To this we could add that it also educates practically or in practice.

Particular performance types are, by their nature, social theory. The practice of some forms of theatre such as social or documentary theatre, embodiment or 'real fiction' is about making an impact in a social and conversational context rather than creating an artifice or 'entertainment' (Brook, 1972). Education occurs in these contexts because theatre is educational. Therefore, it seems a natural part of theatre's evolution from the stage to education for performance to be incorporated into social learning in secondary school classrooms and a teacher-training context.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Welsh, S. (2017). The evolution of monologue as an education. *ArtsPraxis*, 4 (1), 54-64.

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Scott Welsh is a poet and playwright. He combines his role as a social theorist with practice as an actor and playwright. His plays have been performed at Fringe festivals, La Mama Theatre, on ABC Radio National ('The No Teeth People' with Dusk Dundler 2007/2012), The Sydney Fringe Festival, Arts Victoria's Testing Grounds, Geelong After Dark, The Newtown Socialist Bookshop and on the streets under the Martin Luther King Sign in King Street, Newtown. He holds a Master in Philosophical Studies from Deakin University and recently submitted his PhD thesis in Education at Victoria University.