



***ARTSPRAXIS***

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# **ARTSPRAXIS**

*A journal examining innovations in the arts for educational and community contexts*

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*SPECIAL FOCUS: ETHNOTHEATRE AND THEATRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE*

*ARTSPRAXIS* responds to the call for a rich dialogue between all those committed to the arts in educational and community contexts. The journal will include contributions from arts educators, therapists, arts agencies, arts administrators, funding bodies, arts scholars, and community artists from diverse settings. The journal emphasizes critical analysis of the arts in society.

*ARTSPRAXIS* provides a platform for contributors to interrogate why the arts matter and how the arts can be persuasively argued for in a range of domains. The pressing issues which face the arts in society will be deconstructed. Contributors are encouraged to write in a friendly and accessible manner appropriate to a wide readership. Nonetheless, contributions should be informed and scholarly, and must demonstrate the author's knowledge of the material being discussed. Clear compelling arguments are preferred, arguments which are logically and comprehensively supported by the appropriate literature. Authors are encouraged to articulate how their research design best fits the question (s) being examined. Research design includes the full range of quantitative-qualitative methods, including arts-based inquiry; case study, narrative and ethnography; historical and autobiographical; experimental and quasi-experimental analysis; survey and correlation research. Articles which push the boundaries of research design and those which encourage innovative methods of presenting findings are encouraged.

Contributions which seek dialogue across the art forms are welcomed. The genesis of *ARTSPRAXIS* has been informed by the results of a literature search which identified over 60 journals in the arts disciplines but few which facilitated dialogue across and between the arts disciplines.

The second issue of ArtsPraxis will reflect on and respond to the issues raised during The NYU Forum on Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice (2006). This forum is part of an ongoing series NYU is hosting on significant issues that impact on the broad field of educational and

applied theatre. Previous forums have been dedicated to teaching artistry (2005) and assessment in arts education (2003). Ethnotheatre references applied theatre presentations powered by authentic human stories. Theatre for Social Justice aims to elevate discourse on diversity and inclusion. The NYU Forum on Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice will explore how theatre contributes to culture and politics.

Key questions the Forum hopes to address:

- What is theatre for social justice and what contribution does ethnotheatre make to social discourse?
- How can ethnotheatre operate as a qualitative research method?
- Is there an ethnotheatre aesthetic?
- Who are the beneficiaries of theatre for social justice and ethnotheatre?
- How is Theatre for Social Justice, in its diverse manifestations, reflected in our arts education research practices?
- What are some of the ethical issues involved when we use theatre as a tool in qualitative research?

Contributions are not limited to participants in the Forum. We encourage article submissions from interdisciplinary artists and scholars across the many fields in which this innovative arts-based research methodology is being employed. Our goals are to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that will enrich the development of ethnotheatre and expose new audiences and communities to the transformative power of theatre for social justice.

### **CALL FOR PAPERS**

Papers should be no longer than 4000 words and conform to APA style manual.

### **Reviewing Procedures**

Each article will be sent to two peer reviewers. They will provide advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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## **Editorial**

**[CHRISTINA MARÍN](#)**

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

In the first issue of *ArtsPraxis* published in 2004, Philip Taylor introduced the journal as an electronically published periodical posted at the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at New York University's website. The journal offers a platform for scholars, artists, educators, therapists, administrators and community workers in the arts to engage in evaluative, analytical, and reflective dialogues concerning diverse topics in the field. According to Dr. Taylor, "*ArtsPraxis* [was] a deliberate title choice highlighting the critical orientation of the publication to stimulate good and collegial debate across the art forms." I hope the articles in this issue will inspire further conversations among readers, across disciplines, with the authors, and out in the field, as the terms ethnotheatre, ethnodrama, and theatre for social justice continue to evolve.

In line with the Call for Papers, the umbrella definitions we are working from in this issue are intentionally broad to encourage a dialogue regarding the many diverse practices that fall under these categories. Ethnotheatre references applied theatre presentations

powered by authentic human stories. Theatre for Social Justice aims to elevate discourse on diversity and inclusion. The 2006 NYU Forum on Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice was a lively exploration of how theatre contributes to culture and politics.

Key questions the Forum asked participants to consider:

- What is theatre for social justice and what contribution does ethnotheatre make to social discourse?
- How can ethnotheatre operate as a qualitative research method?
- Is there an ethnotheatre aesthetic?
- Who are the beneficiaries of theatre for social justice and ethnotheatre?
- How is Theatre for Social Justice, in its diverse manifestations, reflected in our arts education research practices?
- What are some of the ethical issues involved when we use theatre as a tool in qualitative research?

The four authors contributing to this issue of *ArtsPraxis* consider these topics and offer their own perspectives. In the true spirit of this journal, each of the authors invites further dialogue regarding their article and the issue as a whole through email communication. You will find the authors' emails at the beginning of each article.

### **Johnny Saldaña – Reflections on an Ethnotheatre Aesthetic**

To begin the conversation, Saldaña invites us to consider his five assertions regarding an emerging ethnotheatre aesthetic that weave together the authentic, artistic, and academic elements of the art form.

Careful to own all of his definitions and assertions, Saldaña has emerged as one of the leading scholarly and artistic pundits on the topic. I use this term in its most reverent form, taken from the Sanskrit origins to mean wise man or learned teacher. This status becomes even more apparent as we read all of the subsequent authors in this journal issue referencing his writing on the subject in their articles. Saldaña recognizes the evolutionary nature of the genre and reminds us that the field will continue to change in the future. With deep humility he reminds us that these are his musings on the topic and his personal goal as an artist is to develop an ethnotheatre aesthetic that captures on stage a

complex rendering of ethnotainment.

### **Nancy Putnam Smithner – The Women’s Project: A Director’s Perspective on Creating a Performance Collage**

If some moments in life are truly worth living, then Smithner reveals in her article that certain events are certainly worth reliving, and indeed even worth sharing with an audience. She describes the journey of fifteen women, including herself as director and curator of the project, in creating a unique, insightful and compelling performance collage about the human condition. Smithner reminds us of the intersection fed by ethnotheatrical practices; “[m]erging text (autoethnographic narrative) and the body (the performative aspect), the act of performance allows researchers to ‘re-inhabit’ their bodies as they build knowledge.”

As an audience member who witnessed this performance at The NYU Forum on Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice, I was struck by the grace with which the women on stage performed their auto-ethnographies, spoken word poetry, rants, and monologues, and I marveled at the adept use of physical movement and characterization that wove the fabric of their lives and cultures together. Smithner and the other women illustrated how ethnodrama expands our field of possibilities both as an art form and as research. Through this project, each of these women took on the role of autoethnographic researcher and wrote her narrative; the director had the opportunity, I might even say the responsibility, to hold a mirror up at various angles and reflect the lives of these performer/researchers onstage. Finally, as performers, these women embodied some of the most tender, frustrating, painful, and vivid memories of their lives. Through her article, Smithner invites us to sit in the front row and peer into the context and process through which this performance collage was developed and complements this approach with a theoretical discussion of the feminist and post-colonial lenses she employed as a director/co-researcher in this project.

### **George Belliveau and Vincent White – Performer and Audience Responses to Ethnotheatre: Exploring Conflict and Social Justice**

Belliveau and White manifest the true potential and mission of *ArtsPraxis* through engaging in a dialogue with one another regarding the methodological and ethical issues involved when employing ethno-theatre as a performance and research genre. They further extend the

discussion by highlighting the responses and feedback of participants and audience members of certain ethnotheatrical events to critically examine the efficacy and potential of ethnotheatre. These authors raise fascinating points for us to consider as practitioners and audience members of ethnotheatre, and they too highlight the evolutionary nature of these practices.

I am reminded of the talking books the late Paulo Freire engaged in with critical educators such as Ira Shor, Donaldo Macedo, and the late Myles Horton, among others. These two authors speak to one another, question each other, and reflect back to the other their impressions of the art form as both a performative act and applied research. Belliveau and White's contribution to the examination of ethnotheatre frames it as a theatre of the people, one through which they, as researchers, give careful consideration to the purpose, nature and ethical implications of the dramatic engagement. They are always conscious throughout the research and artistic processes of who the intended audience is for the work.

As authors, they recognize that although they engage in an academic form of playwriting through this article, their piece is not meant for performance. However, they do set the stage for us to further the dialogue about ethnotheatre and theatre for social justice.

### **My Final Reflections as Guest Editor**

One of the greatest pleasures I have taken in editing this second issue of *ArtsPraxis* is the ability to celebrate such diverse voices from the field. The authors published here represent multiple identities in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin (out of respect for our Canadian colleagues, I have honoured the original spelling forms throughout this issue), and scholarly and artistic disciplines. This issue brings together voices who have decades of theatre experience and are new to the field of arts-based research, and educational researchers who are just getting their feet wet in terms of theatrical practices. We welcome any and all discussions and inquiries about the articles and projects published in this issue of *ArtsPraxis* and look forward to furthering the conversation with all of you.

## **Reflections on an Ethnotheatre Aesthetic**

**JOHNNY SALDAÑA**

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

### **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 quiriness 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 "restoried 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).

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## ***The Women's Project: A Director's Perspective on Creating a Performance Collage***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article details the process of mounting original works created by women, for the NYU Forum for Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice. Exploring notions of culture and identity, the material represented the female narrative in performance through autoethnographies, spoken word poetry, rants, monologues, and the use of shifting characterization and movement. The director and performers paid critical attention to the body as an instrument through which meaning is generated, representing the power of the solo voice in the context of the ensemble. The performers' artistic backgrounds, modes of solo performance, and the challenges and triumphs of re-envisioning and re-enacting social and cultural contexts are also discussed.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Art is our connection to the universe, it is our connection to what came before, and to what will be and to what will never be.

(Anna Deavere Smith as quoted in Citron, p. 64).

At the NYU Forum for Ethnotheatre and Theatre for Social Justice, eight performance works on issues of culture and identity were woven together to present a dynamic theatrical collage created and embodied by fifteen women. My goal, as director and curator of the project, was to nurture and develop original writing, movement, poetic monologues, and reconstructed language in order to create a unique, insightful and compelling performance collage about the human condition. The majority of the works were solo performances framed in varying genres, and the final piece was a group work performed and devised by an ensemble of six women.

My background of directing and facilitating one person shows and original theatre works over the past twenty-five years also fed this process.

For many of the women, the decision to write and/or adapt their own material came from the desire to create new texts, and tell their own stories. They were also bent on investigating and researching their cultural backgrounds, and preparing the work as autoethnographic performance. Autoethnography has been defined as an autobiographical genre of writing about the personal and its relationship to culture, which, in turn, creates networks and reinforces community. However, in the words of ethnographer James Clifford:

Twentieth century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages...culture is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, emergent. (Diamond, p. 6)

In postmodern times, cultural stories represent the intersection of subject and history, a literary practice that involves subjective knowledge, both linguistic and ideological. In the global perspective,

writing, reading, imagining and speculating are luxury activities that need to find voice and expression in emerging formats. According to writer, filmmaker, composer, and feminist and post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, for the woman writer:

...the time has passed when she can confidently identify herself with a profession or artistic vocation without question and relating to her color-woman condition.... Today, the growing ethnic-feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult for her to turn a blind eye to the specification of the writer as historical subject (who writes? and in what context?). (p. 6)

In the context of this project, the writers were students and performers who were given the opportunity to present the female narrative in performance, and to focus on untold stories, personal views and morphologies. Towards this purpose, autoethnographic performance is a method that works at the intersection of the intellectual and the bodily, blurring traditionally binary categorizations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, p. xxii). Merging text (autoethnographic narrative) and the body (the performative aspect), the act of performance allows researchers to “re-inhabit” their bodies as they build knowledge. As Elizabeth Grosz so eloquently describes: “Bodies are essential to accounts of power and critiques of knowledge” (1995, 32). One of my directorial intentions in *The Women’s Project* was to pay critical attention to the body as an instrument through which meaning is generated.

## **CONTEXT**

My inspiration for this format originally came from class performance projects that were created in a course called Images of Women in Theatre, taught in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU. The first production that emerged from this seed was a ninety-minute show entitled *Voices of Women*, which was performed as part of the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown Playhouse in the spring of 2003. The intention of this project, which I curated with my colleague Maya Ishiura, then producer of the Storytelling Series at the Provincetown, was to provide a creative forum for student work and performance research to continue beyond the classroom. Additionally, several of the pieces emerged from an assignment to create original work in my

Physical Theatre Improvisation class, which were then more fully developed after the end of the semester. By coaxing abstract concepts into the concrete realities of production, the endeavor was to better understand how original theatre is created.

Ishiura and I auditioned and assembled six performance works, involving nine women. Our goal was to encourage the authentic voice of the performer/storyteller using the themes of culture and identity. The works chosen included the story of one woman's journey in accepting her Jewish-Canadian identity; a textual and physical theatre piece about struggles with racism through the lens of being a Jamaican-American; a shadow theatre work reflecting the lives of three generations of women in a family in Taiwan; a tale with multiple characterizations about hair and identity in the African-American community; a silent mime performance exploring the struggle to succeed financially as a woman; and a devised physical theatre ensemble piece about a woman's metaphorical journey from birth to death. Due to the success of this production, *Voices of Women* was reinvented in the Black Box Theatre at NYU in 2004 as part of the Theatrix! Festival of Student Works. While it was a pared down version of the original production, some new women were represented, and a few from the first group returned. A new and improved format reflected cleaner transitions, as well as a deeper focus on the quality of the acting.

When the opportunity arose to create *The Women's Project* for the Ethnotheatre Forum in April 2006, I sent out an email notice for interested women to apply. Armed with a better sense of what would work in this structure, I was able to choose most of the works sight unseen. The works that I ultimately selected fell squarely into the category of representing notions of both culture and identity, in other words, pieces about psychological issues, romance, melodramas, realistic character dramas and monologues written by other authors were rejected.

The accepted selections were exciting; they revealed complex and intriguing writing styles, and captured verisimilitude and universality through their reflections on cultural experiences. According to Johnny Saldaña: "Playwrights have always been ethnodramatists, for what other source for a drama is there besides social life?" (4). *The Women's Project* encompassed several genres of performance material including monologues, spoken word poetry, rants and multiple character works (in

which the performer shifts quickly, portraying many different characters and personas). While most of the pieces were written from a personal perspective, there were several original interpretations and adaptations of poetry and fiction, and one devised ensemble piece that was performed with text and movement.

I met with the women one on one and helped them shape, edit or develop texts, which were in some cases quite extensive. Careful editing and pruning was essential, for in these short performance gems, each word, phrase and sentence needed to propel the action, illuminate the themes, and develop the characters. I created a collage for dramatic impact, merging the works into a working format complete with choreography, transitions and sound elements. The result was a combination of the participants' contributions of "meaningful life vignettes, significant insights and epiphanies" (Saldaña, 2005). As a director, I was able to have an overview of how the participants reacted to one another, transitioned, walked, gestured, and posed. All of the women sat in positions on the stage during the performance and listened, watched and supported each other's work. Instead of six long monologues in the format of "everyone takes a turn," I crafted vocal exchanges, calls and responses, and corporeal interactions in which the women physically drew one another into focus when one piece transitioned to another.

## **THE PERFORMERS/PARTICIPANTS**

In my role as director of the larger performance collage, placing the disparate works in a flowing order was challenging. The show opened with a work by a Guyanese woman, investigating her racial and religious identity after growing up in both England and the United States. She played a panoply of characters, as well as herself at different ages, switching adroitly back and forth. Crossing gender lines by portraying teenage boys and girls, her mother, her father, and several of her teachers, she aptly yet humorously represented a clash of cultures. The next performer related the story of her initial discovery of the depth of her faith in Judaism, and the inherent challenges and joys of this reality as she retraced memories of her initial awareness of spirituality as a young teenager.

Through a journey to Lebanon to learn more about her roots, a Lebanese-American performer told of encounters with her

grandparents, and vivid stories of travel, memory and language. She sang a Lebanese song and portrayed multiple characters from her past. In another multiple character work, the next performer created an original spoken word poem about her own diverse perspective of being a Latina, and the conflicts of her multidimensional identity. She reflected on how she was perceived differently by various peer groups, her parents and a variety of authority figures in her life, popping in and out of roles with intense physicality. The rhythms of her language and her use of varying accents illuminated the dynamic multicultural landscape of New York City.

There were several interpretations of existing texts. One was an excerpt of writing from Anais Nin's "A Woman Speaks," about women taking charge of their independence. The performer's voice, reflecting Nin's words as her own personal philosophy, gave a collective overshadowing to the whole project: "I am the master of my destiny...you can create your own freedom and you don't have to ask for it..." By embodying Nin's prose, she was able to represent her own social vision about the importance of change, liberation and independence as a woman. The next performer was a writer who had obtained permission from the author to create an original dramatic adaptation of *Clothes* (a short story by Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni) in which a young Indian woman plunges headfirst into an arranged marriage. Her story moves from India, where the young woman meets her prospective husband, to the intimacy of their wedding night; and then goes on to tell of their move to the United States and her subsequent confusion and frustration in the experience of the merging of two cultures.

The audience then experienced comedic impact with a fast paced "pregnancy rant," a raucous and humorous slice of life in an African-American neighborhood about getting tattooed, buying and taking a pregnancy test, and the repercussions therein. The performer utilized the rest of the cast as respondents who interjected questions throughout her fast paced rant such as: "What?!...Where?...Were you pregnant or not?" This interchange tied the entire group of performers together vocally, thus the project transitioned smoothly into the final multimedia piece about mothers and daughters, performed by a diverse ensemble of six women. Through text and movement, they embodied various characterizations and abstractions, enhanced by music and a slideshow

of photographs of the women and their mothers at various stages of their lives. This work was originally conceived by one ensemble member who assembled the group, devised the piece in collaboration with them, and then stood outside to direct it.

Devised theatre is different for every group, employing a variety of processes and methods of working. In the aforementioned piece, great emphasis was placed on an eclectic process requiring innovation, invention, imagination, risk, and above all, an overall group commitment to developing the work. While the director had conceived of the theme, and gathered information dramaturgically, the other ensemble members were extremely invested in sharing their own perspectives and shaping the complex choreography. The women brought in literature from their own research and cultural backgrounds, and participated in the creation of the final product by assembling, editing and re-shaping each individual's contradictory experiences with motherhood or being mothered. As the overall director of the Project, I made textual suggestions during the process, and came in at the end to give feedback on the movement sequencing, transitions, and structure.

## **FORMS**

*The Women's Project* was unique in that a variety of performance modes were represented. Solo performance, in existence throughout theatre history, has more recently been defined and differentiated as the solo play, the one woman/man show, the character sketch, the memory monodrama (past emotions and events), and the diary monodrama, (the relating of personal experiences or private tales of mournful misfortune) (Catron, p. 42-43). There is additionally autoethnographic prose narrative, told from the central protagonist's perspective, which can also be replayed as a scripted adaptation in the form of a one-person ethnodrama, if the original story suggests playable stage action for a performer (Saldaña, p. 20).

Contemporary solo artists have often been shuffled into the categories of the standup, the storyteller, or the performance artist, the latter of which greatly muddies the waters when attempting to clarify the solo genre. It is a well-known fact that solo performance can be overly didactic or political, confessional, solipsistic, or self-congratulatory. Conversely, the form can represent informative autobiographical insights, therefore benefiting the artist through opportunities to realize

aesthetic and social visions, to voice sociopolitical commentary, and to exorcise personal demons through personal catharsis (Saldaña, p. 34). The autoethnographic solo performance using multiple character transitions can be episodic and complex, as well as frame ambivalent realities.

Ethnotheatre employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or interpretations of data. Investigating a particular facet of the human condition, it is necessary to create a solid performance framework regardless of how the idea for a drama was first inspired. Theorist Tami Spry writes:

For me, performing autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally.... It has encouraged me to dialogically look back upon my self as other, generating critical agency in the stories of my life, as the polyglot facets of self and other engage, interrogate and embrace. (186)

For Spry, the dynamic and dialectical relation of the text and body emerge as a major theme in her autoethnographic praxis. In the fieldwork, writing, and performing of autoethnography, text and body are redefined, and their boundaries blur dialectically (2003). Dwight Conquergood articulates the term "dialogical performance," wherein the process of performance the performer engages the text of another – oral, written by self or other, dialogically, meaning the performer approaches the text with a commitment to be challenged, changed, embraced and interrogated (1985). Indeed, through the representation of movement and language, postcolonial and postmodern writing has exposed and politicized the presence of the body.

Dialogical performance is an ethical performance approach that aims to bring together different voices, worldviews, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another (Conquergood, 1985). In embodying the text fictionalized by Divakaruni, the performer "maintained close allegiance to the lived experience...real people...presenting (her) stories through an artistic medium" (Saldaña, p. 3). Her intention was to investigate cultural mores in India, thereby embodying the playtext of a fictionalized account of an Indian woman,

through her own lens as an Indian woman. Her performance was thus a story within a story, or a play within a play. The Lebanese-American performer brought memories of the past to life in describing her return to Lebanon, and embodying and conveying the words of her grandparents. In her autoethnographic account, her nostalgia for her roots clashed with her own desire to be an independent Lebanese-American woman, and her own social vision informed her emerging cultural identity.

The “pregnancy rant” was culled from a larger autobiographical playtext, which has roles for three women performers representing different sides or identities of one woman. By isolating the rant or “slice of life” as a shortened autoethnotheatrical work, the performer/writer told of becoming overwhelmed by fear of the pressures of pregnancy. In this case, her personal narrative performance gave shape to social interpretation, a story of the body and through the body, which made a cultural conflict concrete (Langellier, 1999). Acting as herself with heightened theatricality, the performer created a parody of an extremely humorous, fast-talking, tough city woman. Saldaña, who was in the audience, referred to many of the works in *The Women’s Project* as “stand-up” material. He has emphasized:

Theatre’s primary goal is neither to educate nor to enlighten. 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. (14)

Humor can help to illuminate performance work, but stand-up comedy is often perceived as superficial fare. Alison Oddey defines the stand-up comic in a positive light as “being funny, owning her own identity through the words she has written and speaks” (1999, p. 3). In response to “stand up” being a traditionally male genre, she goes on to emphasize that performing stand-up is an empowering experience, allowing the performer to dominate and to control an audience, “...challenging a stereotypical role and the patriarchal tradition by making a woman the speaking subject” (1999, p. 290). In the context of *The Women’s Project*, several women who had written their own material performed it from a personally humorous perspective, and in doing so transformed the

autobiographical process itself into a public event. While I would not categorize these performances as “stand-up,” their comedic sensitivity to the realities of daily life lent itself to the action of the project as a whole. They represented the polyphonic voice/body processes of cultural identity as playful, mobile, and dynamic, blurring the boundaries of reality and imagination.

Ethnographer Jim Mienczakowski (2006) emphasizes the use of *vraisemblance* in ethnodrama, the creation of plausible accounts of the everyday world, in order to represent perceived social realities. He goes on to describe performance ethnographers who made use of parody (M.J. Mulkay, 1985) and irony (Laurel Richardson, 1991) as a form of social analysis and a deliberate ploy to instigate perceptual shifts in the response of the audience. In the performances in *The Women's Project*, reality was always a social construction, interpreting culture through self-reflection, including the representation of memory as well as human action. Indeed, the “standup mode” of performance traditionally signifies strength, standing alone on the stage. In this format, the women could have it both ways, presenting a powerful solo voice, but also being surrounded by an ensemble of other voices.

If one is playing oneself, in an autobiographical mode, as was the case for many of the women in this project, the façade of characterization is removed, and the performer is seen without that protective mask, resulting in fundamental honesty. As Saldaña puts it, theatre is one of the artistic media through which fictionalized and nonfictionalized social life – the human condition – can be portrayed symbolically and aesthetically for spectator engagement and reflection (10). Within the play frame a performer is not herself (because of the operations of illusion), but she is also not not herself (because of the operations of reality). Performer and audience alike operate in a world of double consciousness (Saldaña, Spry, Mienczakowski). For me, as director and curator, the goal of working with many different modes of performance in a collage format was to offer the participants a release from traditional structures and expectations about writing and directing and plunge into an exploratory, intimate and playful mode of discovery.

## **PROCESS**

My intention was to create a comprehensive collage that was complex,

multi-layered, multi-vocal and multi-visioned, resisting the imposition of any single perspective, answer or truth (Heddon, p. 218). I did not seek, as director, to place myself at the top of a hierarchical structure, but rather to remain at the center of the rehearsal fulcrum, ensuring that everyone was working together. Some women were performing their own work for the first time, and others came to me with partially developed and fragmented scripts, at times incredibly lengthy and unmanageable for this particular format. I worked with them to edit and mold the work. As Saldaña puts it: "...always remember: playwriting is both a craft and an art...the ultimate sin of theatre is to bore, and only a self-indulgent playwright refuses to edit lengthy text from initial and post-performance drafts" (p. 27). Most of the women were trained as actors or performers, which indeed informed their creative process. Many complied with performer Meera Syal's statement: "It makes you a better actor to write, because you know from an actor's point of view what is a good line and what isn't" (Oddey, 1999, p.155). We set about working with clear and heightened physicality, so that in many cases, a kind of highly personalized and theatricalized storytelling took place.

Those women in the group who were specifically exploring their cultural backgrounds delved into their own extensive research, which they then translated into performance texts for the stage. Conquergood observes of performative ethnographic research: "Ethnography is an embodied practice...; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing...(it) privileges the body as a site of knowing..." (Hesse-Biber & Leavy p. 180) Thus it was essential to represent the women's stories in a clearly articulated choreographic format, balancing the disparate nature of the works, as time shifts occurred spontaneously without the encumbrance of sets or props.

I also sought to achieve depth of characterization, understand tempo, and guide vocal dynamics. Vocal variation was key— rate, pitch, volume and timbre – to overcome the danger of a single voice becoming a mere drone of sound, even in the context of many other voices. In many cases, language was a direct reflection of character, as the performer morphed into different characters, utilizing many accents. Indeed, the importance of accent was heightened, as many of these works were dramas of language, using imagery and poetic diction to enlarge the theatrical effect. In an intensely productive working environment, our one on one rehearsals allowed a comfortable give and take between actor and director with the possibility to develop

wonderfully layered and detailed work. We were able to experiment with new approaches or techniques, such as adding gestures, abstraction, stillness, movements, and hone rhythm and pacing of lines.

## **CONCLUSION**

I believe the potential for expression is limitless, following the rhythms and dimensions of the performance locale, and the inspiring contributions of the performers. I echo the words of director Andrea Hairston: "What I am straining and aching after is a language for the almost unspeakable (in tongues I know) almost unfathomable, and certain contradictory diversity that is my experience of the world" (Donkin & Clement, p. 236). With the desire and intention to maintain aesthetic control of their material, the performers sought to discover and share the authority of their research, memories and experiences. In order to meet the great challenge of re-envisioning and recreating social contexts and worlds, they drew forth, "a way of understanding the intersections of self, other and context passionately and reflexively" (Spry, p. 717). The act of women speaking their own stories radically challenges traditional notions of spectacle and spectatorship, as female performers move their voices and bodies from the background to the foreground.

Admittedly, the investigation of this process needs further analysis, incorporating the voices of the performers about their own experiences in researching and creating material. This should be achieved through a series of interviews seeking details about aesthetic goals as well as cultural identity. It is my hope as well that these performative representations of the complex, diverse and ambiguous lives of real women will go on to find other venues of expression, thus growing and expanding into newly devised frameworks.

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## Performer and Audience Responses to Ethnotheatre: Exploring Conflict and Social Justice

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### ABSTRACT

*George and Vince are engaged in a dialogue in which they reflect on meaningful ways that ethnotheatre can be employed as both a research methodology and a form of dissemination. In addition to examining some of the literature available on ethnotheatre, their discussion highlights some of the ethical and methodological issues that may arise when using this approach to conduct research. The authors share examples of how each of them have engaged in ethnodrama pieces, discussing why this approach proved a viable means to explore their respective research contexts. Feedback from participants and audience members who witnessed the ethnodrama performances provide insightful perspectives to critically examine the efficacy and potential of ethnotheatre.*

The emotional impact on me was amazing. I became angry, annoyed and frustrated and did not know why. Reliving the event in this way, watching actors living my life; reciting words that rang true, collecting all the catch phrases, the despair, the humour, the anger, all that was misunderstood, and the turmoil that many of us went through, put things into perspective for me.

-*Voices in Conflict*, Performer participant<sup>1</sup>

The ethnodrama *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves* was very powerful because it engaged us as audience members – it was evocative and involving – ‘holistic.’ It integrated ‘feeling’ into the research.

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience participant

## THE DIALOGUE

George: Vince, I think we should note from the outset that research in ethnotheatre has developed and matured tremendously in the last two decades. The practical and theoretical work of Mienczakowski (1997; 2001), Goldstein (2001), Gray (2000; 2002; 2003), Taylor (2006), among others, has been instrumental in defining this innovative and embodied approach to research. And more recently, Gallagher (2007) has closely examined some of the ethics and meaning when using ethnotheatre as a form of research. Her work provides us with valuable questions as researchers, especially because this field is evolving so rapidly.

Vince: And in ways that are influencing research in a variety of fields. My first impression of ethnotheatre was that it seemed to be an ideal form of inquiry for researchers like you, George, who come from a theatre background. However, we’re increasingly seeing how it can be meaningfully applied to various fields of study.

George: Including your own, Vince.

Vince: Absolutely. I’ve grown to appreciate its extraordinary potential to support research in counselling psychology and education. You mention

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<sup>1</sup> The performer drew several excerpts from a collection of lectures, seminars and interviews with Anais Nin, *A Woman Speaks*, edited by Eveyln J. Hinz.

the work of Gray and Mienczakowski. Both of them come from a healthcare background, and they have found innovative ways to apply ethnotheatre in their work. But, we haven't mentioned Johnny Saldaña. Arguably, it is Saldaña (2005, 2003, 1998) who has articulated most clearly the potential of ethnotheatre as a form of artistic research endeavour.

George: I agree. Saldaña's understanding and application of theatre as both art and research is unique. Like Cecily O'Neill's (1995) work on process drama, Saldaña brings theatre and educational research together without compromising the art form or the integrity of the research inquiry.

Vince: Certainly a delicate balance to maintain, and one that gives rise to some fundamental questions about this form of inquiry. Your reference to Saldaña's ability to engage in this form of research without compromising the art highlights an area of particular uncertainty for me. I find myself questioning to what extent is some level of expertise in theatre required in order to remain true to ethnotheatre.

George: Some of the literature on ethnotheatre examines this very issue, with differing views by scholars generating "two camps engaged with dramatic performance as research" (Gray, 2003, p.254). The majority (camp) are identified as researchers, often ethnographers from the social sciences, health sciences and humanities, who are finding innovative and meaningful ways to present their data through performance.<sup>2</sup> The smaller group consists of theatre artists who make use of (auto)ethnography, (auto)biography or similar approaches within their playwriting—sometimes without realizing they are indeed conducting qualitative forms of research (Grace & Wasserman, 2006).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Diamond & Mullen, 2000; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Finley & Finley, 1999; Goldstein, 2001; Gray, 2003; Mienczakowski, 1997; Pifer, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> This group could include American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie*), Eugene O'Neill (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), Canadians Sharon Pollock (*Doc*), Guillermo Verdecchia (*Fronteras Americanas*), Djanet Sears (*Afrika Solo*); drama educators Joe Norris (2000), Michael Rohd (1998, 2005), and Johnny Saldaña (1998, 2003, 2005); and independent writers such as Anna Deavere Smith who has turned her

Vince: A sense of collaboration between these so-called camps, using the unique strengths of the researcher and artist, would seem ideal.

George: And this is precisely what Saldaña (2003) suggests: “[s]cholars in ethnography have much to contribute to those initially educated as artists, and artists well versed in the creative process and products of theatre have much to offer ethnographers. Both disciplines, after all, share a common goal: to create unique, insightful, and engaging text about the human condition” (p. 229).

Vince: In this sense, ethnotheatre strives for a weaving of research and art, rather than an either/or situation, which is quite reductive.

George: Wearing the Secret Out by Chapman, Swedberg, Sykes (2003), included in Saldaña’s anthology *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (2005), exemplifies this spirit of collaboration as a researcher and two theatre artists join forces to create an ethnotheatre piece about homophobia in the teaching profession.

Vince: In addition to highlighting the integration of art and research, this piece illustrates ethnotheatre’s potential to meaningfully engage audiences and performers in issues of social justice. Arguably, these are matters that exceed the limitations of a text-bound (re)presentation. The performative space provides an integral opportunity to engage with lived experience(s) of marginalization and oppression on an embodied level. That is not to suggest that this form of engagement enables one to actually experience events or circumstances as others have. In fact, I would argue that paradoxically, ethnotheatre induces a heightened appreciation for the sacredness of these lived experience(s) through the feelings of resonance and profound empathy that are often powerfully evoked.

George: Absolutely, and your point brings forth the significant role that audience plays in this form of research. I have found that the intended audience for a particular ethnodrama needs to be considered. For

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research of actual events into a series of one-woman performances (*Twilight: Los Angeles*, 1992; *Fires in the Mirror*, 1993).

example, writers may privilege the performance/aesthetic over the content data, if they're introducing a concept that may be unfamiliar or they're reaching a wider, general audience. However, in other cases, such as Mienczakowski's work with patients who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, the artistry may be of secondary consequence (Mienczakowski et al., 2002). When performed research is targeted for an audience of informants who will see the production and then participate in post-performance discussions, Mienczakowski, Smith, Morgan (2002) suggest that "accuracy and credibility are more important (to health-related audiences) than theatrical traditions and expectations" (p.34).

Vince: In both respects, we see how researcher and artist inform and support each other's practice. Clearly, each has a great deal to contribute. This notion of which is privileged or emphasized helps guide much of the critical decision-making that occurs throughout the process, reconciling possible tensions that may arise when art and research find themselves at cross purposes.

George: That's right. We cannot underestimate the significance of audience in determining whether art or research is (consciously or unconsciously) privileged in the conception of an ethnotheatre piece.

Vince: In both of our work, we can see examples of how audiences and/or performers feature prominently in determining where this emphasis is placed. As researchers, we give careful consideration to the purpose, nature and ethical implications of the dramatic engagement. In such instances, I believe that we never completely set aside the aesthetic, largely because of the integral role it plays in engaging the participant. To simply disregard it, would no doubt significantly diminish much of what makes ethnotheatre such a powerful research approach.

George: Absolutely, and this is clearly evidenced in the audience and performer responses that we've collected in our respective projects. Like the majority of authors we cite above, we've engaged in ethnotheatre as a form of research. And, I suggest, that the experience in itself of creating and producing ethnotheatre has been fruitful, pushing ourselves and our audiences into new ways of thinking about art and research.

Vince: I agree. Our own experiences of creating, performing, and now writing about ethnotheatre has given us both an opportunity to better understand and hopefully advance this relatively new field/approach to research. Our discussions have revealed different lenses through which this methodology can be considered. But what can we contribute to the research literature? How can we shed light from another angle on this work, and hopefully advance our knowledge?

George: Vince, I notice that you refer to ethnotheatre as a research methodology. That's interesting, because, to date, I've incorporated ethnotheatre more as a form of dissemination of previous research.

Vince: This is an important distinction to make. George, your research and much of the work we've cited here illustrate how ethnotheatre can meaningfully represent research findings in a way that transcends traditional approaches. It has certainly proven itself a viable means to affect praxis between researcher and practitioner.

George: This is certainly true in the case of drama education. I feel that it is important for me as a researcher to give careful consideration as to how my work can be best represented in order to inform classroom practice. Ethnotheatre enables us to actively engage, and perhaps even 'discover' new research findings on a personal and embodied level. But your reference to ethnotheatre as a methodology suggests that it also serves as a form of inquiry.

Vince: Yes. In my recent project, *Voices in Conflict: The Lived Experience(s) of the British Columbia Public Teachers' Job Action of October 2005*<sup>4</sup>, I was searching for a form of engagement that would

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<sup>4</sup> *Voices in Conflict: The Lived Experience(s) of the British Columbia Public Teachers' Job Action of October 2005* was first performed at the University of British Columbia in June of 2006. It was staged again several weeks later at a local high school where it was open to the public. The play is a dramatization of data collected during events of October 2005, when British Columbia Public Teachers defied essential service legislation and walked off the job for ten days in protest of a second imposed contract by the provincial government. In addition to field notes recorded on the picket line, at the Supreme Court of

enable participants to gain a deeper understanding of perspectives that significantly contrasted from their own. In this regard, I was employing ethnotheatre both as a means to represent those perspectives, and also as a vehicle for studying the effect of performatively engaging with these perspectives.

George: So, the performance itself served as another site of research?

Vince: Yes, because data collection was extended to include performer and audience responses to the ethnodrama. Yet another layer of the research evolved from this process when these responses shaped a new direction for the project.

George: Given your last point, I think it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at audience and performer responses, and consider what these tell us about ethnotheatre and its viability both as a means of dissemination and a form of inquiry, particularly in relation to our own research in areas related to social justice and conflict.

Vince: With *Voices in Conflict*, it's interesting to note that my use of ethnotheatre on this project evolved organically. I found myself collecting artefacts of these memorable events from sources that were clearly in opposition with each other. I felt that I was being pulled in so many different directions. I would go from spending my mornings on the picket line to attending afternoon court proceedings that were aimed at forcing the teachers back to work. There was also widespread local and national media attention on the event, and countless people were 'sounding off' their opinions about the whole matter through various means including the Internet. I found myself desperately seeking the best approach to examine all of these artefacts in order to make some sense of it all. But this alone didn't seem to go far enough for me. I felt that what was sorely needed in this situation was an opportunity for everyone involved to 'perform' the role of a different 'character' in the conflict, in the hope that it might promote new insights and enable people

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British Columbia hearings, and during public forums, the performance included opinions anonymously posted by the public on a popular Internet site known as Craigslist. Other commentary and dialogue in the play were based on narratives shared through interviews by those who experienced the job action events both first-hand and from a distance.

to gain some perspective of the other side. These circumstances brought to mind Conquergood's (1986) assertion that "the act of performance fosters identification between dissimilar ways of being" (p.30). Ethnotheatre seemed to offer a uniquely viable approach to giving participants the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the perspective of 'other.'

George: So, your initial intentions to examine the lived experiences associated with these events eventually transformed to explore how the tension and/or conflict of opposing voices could be brought to life through ethnotheatre?

Vince: Exactly. I found myself unexpectedly expanding the research context to examine how individual perceptions and opinions might be influenced by engaging in the dramatization of a particular conflict as either a performer or audience member. I wanted to know if drama might provide a means for developing a deeper awareness of the opposing views involved in a particular conflict. Also, I sought to determine whether or not engaging in a dramatization of this nature, as either a performer or audience member, promoted a greater willingness to seek a resolution or compromise that was satisfactory to both sides.

George: And what kind of feedback were you able to gather on these questions?

Vince: There were a number of participant and audience responses that particularly caught my attention:

When I walked [in the theatre], the first thing I saw was the picket signs. The feelings of distress and tension came flooding back to my mind and literally felt like a punch to my stomach ... comments (were) made during (the performance) that seemed like carbon copies of comments I had made or heard during the strike. I found it interesting to hear my own voice in some of the comments. I was very passionate and determined that I was correct while making the comments but now I am not so sure. I have many more questions this time around. I do not like the feelings of chaos. I do not want to be on the edge anymore!

-*Voices in Conflict*, Audience participant

George: What do you make of such a response?

Vince: Immediately it brings to mind the power of ethnotheatre in terms of what is embodied. This participant reminds us that the performative realm carries with it the potential to re-experience the past in a way that extends significantly beyond the written word. References to tension “flooding back” and the significance of hearing one’s “own voice in some of the comments” articulate a space that invites one into an active engagement with a particular experience.

George: The actors’ voices, body movements and the tension created during their interaction no doubt creates another reality for the audience, taking on a new life from their previous experience as individuals living through or witnessing the strike. I’m curious as to whether or not you informed the performers of your research intentions.

Vince: I did. I felt that I had to be clear with both audience and performer participants about my intentions from the outset. Both were informed that the play involved casting people in roles that represented the other side of their stance during the labour conflict. None of the performer participants expressed any reservation about taking on these roles, and many were actually enthused to do it. It was no secret that our purpose was to discover if these experiences would influence people’s perspectives on the conflict.

I was asked to play the part of a person who had crossed a picket line. This is against my philosophy and morality. I was excited by this possibility. I read the lines, tried to get into character, tried to appreciate the vantage point, even agreed with some of the views. I read with gusto, feeling and passion about a view I disagreed with. The bottom line? The rhetoric and rationalization for crossing the picket line was weak, self-serving, egotistical, arrogant, disrespectful and sad. I could read the words with passion as they were just that. The actual behaviour of using those words to cross was still as loathsome as it was before I read the part. The impact on my values was to understand the words, respect the right to say and feel them, to re-weigh some of the arguments, appreciate the view but to

simply reject the behaviour.

-*Voices in Conflict*, Performer participant

George: I sense a certain conviction from this participant's response that the engagement, while meaningful, didn't affect a change in his perspective.

Vince: True. His comments suggest that the experience provided an opportunity for him to look at this conflict on another level by taking on the character of someone with whom he fundamentally disagreed. However, what I think is particularly significant is how the participant describes engaging in this research context with "excitement," "passion" and "gusto." In my experience with other forms of inquiry, I don't recall ever having participants express this level of involvement. The fact that it ultimately didn't change his perspective on the actual conflict must be noted. (In other cases, respondents suggested that their positions were impacted.) Nevertheless, I think the meaningfulness of this level of engagement cannot be overstated.

George: You suggested that you also had the audience in mind during the construction of your piece? How so?

Vince: I was looking to their responses as a means to shape the next stage of inquiry and provide another layer of data collection. Therefore, following each performance, audience members were encouraged to participate in an open discussion with the director/writer and performers about their experience of the play and its implications. I also invited performers and audience members to provide written reflections that could be anonymously submitted via e-mail. In this sense, the ethnodrama became a stimulus for discussion and to gather future data. Audience and participant responses were integral to the process and provided rich discussions and data.

George: I find that fascinating, because one of the most significant findings during my extensive drama and social justice research was that elementary students (n = 6000) found post-production activities/discussions more memorable and meaningful than the production itself (Belliveau, 2006a).

Vince: Yet, wouldn't you say that without the production, these post-production activities could not have had the same impact, in terms of the level of reflection and discussion?

George: Exactly.

Vince: The same would be true with my ethnodrama project. If the production itself did not engage the audience, the vibrant post-discussions would not have taken place.

George: But, I want to come back to one of your earlier points regarding how you conceived the ethnodrama piece with audience participation in mind.

Vince: Sure.

George: Like your project, my ethnodrama piece *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves*<sup>5</sup>, which explored the lived experience of pre-service teachers creating an anti-bullying play, was further informed by each performance and the responses that we received from the audience in the discussions that followed. However, in constructing the ethnodrama, I had not initially intended to examine audience or participant feedback.

Vince: And in this regard, I think you uncover another vital feature of ethnotheatre, one that highlights its potential as a transformative and emergent form of inquiry. In terms of your intentions for this research, I get a sense that the process evolved in a manner that you may not have initially intended at the outset.

George: Yes. My initial intention with this project was to capture what

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<sup>5</sup> *Collective Playbuilding: Writing Ourselves* explores the experience of 12 pre-service teachers collectively creating an anti-bullying play that was to tour elementary schools. After writing four traditional papers about the learning and meaning that emerged from the drama research (Belliveau, 2004a; 2004b; 2005a; 2006a), I decided to closely examine the pre-service teachers' journals, my field notes, and the script they developed, as a stimulus to create a dramatized script of what emerged during the play-building process (Belliveau, 2006b) – in effect dramatizing the data (Saldaña, 2003). The ethnodrama has since been produced several times for educational gatherings and conferences.

was seen, as well as heard, during the field research, revealing both action and reaction. I wanted to find a way to articulate and embody the tensions that constructively enabled the pre-service teachers to create their social justice play, because I felt this was missing in the traditional papers I had written. How an audience would react to my ethnodrama was an afterthought. I sought their feedback through surveys to try and discover the meaning or value of using theatre to disseminate research.

Vince: And what did you discover?

George: In the over 40 audience responses to the question: "What did you take away from the research performance of *Collective Playbuilding*?"<sup>6</sup> two dominant themes recurred: *Drama's ability to depict the (inner and outer) voices of all stakeholders*, and the importance and relevance of *playing out the process and journey, not only the product and destination*.

Vince: I think this notion of giving voice to both inner and outer dialogues is particularly significant since it brings to our awareness so much of what is left unsaid in our everyday interpersonal engagements. Your work highlights how ethnotheatre can excavate these thoughts and emotions bringing them to the surface to re-shape our understanding of a given research context.

George: Along your train of thought, an audience member pointed out how:

The playing (acting) within the ethnodrama piece helped us as audience to constantly question so-called truth. We realized these were actors interpreting the stories of others. There was almost a Brechtian-alienation effect!

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience member

Vince: This highlights how certain forms of research are ultimately an

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<sup>6</sup> The piece was first performed in Victoria, British Columbia at the Provoking Curriculum conference (2005), then in Vancouver, British Columbia at the Investigating our Practices conference (2005), and finally in San Francisco, California at the American Education Research Association conference (2006).

interpretation, a particular perspective, of what took place. It emphasizes how in some research contexts it's nearly impossible for researchers to distance themselves fully from their perspective.

George: Another revealing comment made by an audience member shed light on how this particular ethnodrama brought forth bullying issues in various contexts:

The performance pulled me into the actual context of bullying and how student teachers and educators can work collaboratively to find ways to help kids effectively deal with it. As an audience member, I felt actively engaged with the research. It compelled me to consider the degree to which bullying exists among faculty members at our university, and how a performance of this nature might shed some light on the ways in which "power" is used among colleagues to further personal and professional self-interests. This led me to wonder about the performers and what their response to this type of engagement might be.

-*Collective Playbuilding*, Audience member

Vince: It is interesting to note how your ethnodrama appears to have caused this audience member to consider bullying from another perspective, perhaps provoked by being engaged with it in an 'actual context.' By recognizing how bullying relates to a power imbalance between individuals or groups, he or she is able to draw a parallel between the social injustices that are played out among kids, and that which similarly occurs between adults. I'd be curious to know if any of your performers raised particular issues during your process.

George: On a slightly different angle, one of the performers raised an ethical question about the scripting of my ethnodrama piece. She wondered about the authenticity and implications of blending the voices of a number of interviewees or responses into one character. Because each of my characters in *Collective Playbuilding* represents a mixture of several sources, no character speaks for one participant. Instead, each is an integration of many voices. She was aware in the construction of the piece that we took some artistic license by connecting voices together. Sometimes we even changed words, shortened a long sentence, or even added a sentence – keeping the spirit but trying to

make the data artistically engaging.

Vince: This returns us to the fundamental questions of ‘how’ and ‘why,’ which researchers who employ ethnotheatre must be prepared to address, particularly since they carry with them important ethical implications. George, you’ve highlighted the ongoing debate on whether or not ethnodramatists should remain faithful to the exact text collected during the research, or whether they should permit themselves the artistic and methodological license to represent the essence (a theatricalized version) of their collected data. Transforming your research into a script is not an easy task, because as researchers we often feel that something is lost when we don’t directly present our data findings.

George: Yet, as we’ve come to know, much is gained when we work with the data through drama. Elements of the research can be shown through movement, sound, space, which cannot always be represented in a written document.

Vince: This issue is something I’ve wrestled with since first being introduced to ethnotheatre. To address it from an ethical standpoint, I found it helpful to temporarily set aside the question of artistic value, and focus exclusively on researcher intent. I’ve come to appreciate how ethnotheatre serves as a powerful vehicle for representing data collected within a given research context. For this reason the question of whether we ought to theatricalize data is particularly relevant (Saldaña, 2003). What are our ethical obligations to research participants who share with us their lived experiences? What responsibilities do we have to cultures or other social systems that we examine in depth?

George: If we state that our purpose is to represent the lived experience(s) of research participants or a particular culture, then I believe the researcher has an ethical obligation to tread delicately when fictionalizing data that has emerged within this context. At the very least, participants must be afforded an opportunity to be involved in this process, or at least approve of these dramatic ‘representations.’ It may not be enough to simply inform people from the outset of our intention

to dramatize this data, given that they cannot possibly know the end result clearly enough to provide informed consent.

Vince: I agree, and in the case of *Voices in Conflict*, I felt obligated to check in with participants whenever I made changes or took liberties with data they had provided for the script. This created yet another layer of research, because these discussions often prompted new questions that unearthed another level of my understanding about these events. In this respect, it represented a recursive approach to engaging participants in the telling of their stories, a method similar to that which Arvey employs in her constructivist approach to narrative inquiry (2003). This also gave participants an opportunity to conceptualize their opinions and perspectives in dramatic form. I was surprised to find that participants often wanted to consider the aesthetic value, and how it would contribute artistically to the larger piece.

George: What's fascinating about the debate (tension) between original data versus theatricalized data is that we are currently engaged in it. This script is an edited version – the essence of what we have developed over a few months of dialoguing, e-mailing, and phone conversations. As Saldaña (2005) would suggest, we're looking for "the juicy stuff" (p. 16) and left the so-called boring stuff out.

Vince: This returns us to the question of artistic value and that delicate balance we spoke of earlier. For instance, in our current dialogue that we are presenting here, our intention is not to entertain necessarily, but rather to inform and share with our audience aspects of dramatizing data. Whereas in a play geared towards performance we would likely include theatrical elements such as rising tensions and climax. Generally, theatre scripts are blueprints for performance, meant to be lifted from the page. So, can our current engagement be called a play?

George: Saldaña, in his provocative piece "This is Not a Performative Text" (2006), would say absolutely not. I think the distinction can be best understood in terms of engagement and an embodied experience. A play requires engaging an audience on various levels. Words alone do not fully achieve this. And there are other dramatic characteristics to consider. For instance, our conversation lacks conflict – the dialogue is likely too cooperative to become a play.

Vince: I agree that this is more of a carefully constructed transcribed conversation, which would arguably fail to engage a theatre audience. However, don't you think that's a little narrow of a spectrum of what defines a play?

George: Ah, Vince, I see your intent here ... trying to create a little tension, are you?

Vince: Perhaps.

George: Well, yes, our description of what constitutes a play may be too representative of a Western perspective.

Vince: I know that neither of us would want to constrain the ways in which theatre may be conceptualized because both of us have discovered first-hand the seemingly endless layers of inquiry that emerge from engaging with research on an embodied level. These have occurred as a result of our willingness to expand ways of thinking about theatre beyond it simply representing a tool for research dissemination.

George: Indeed. And for this, we owe a great deal of gratitude to those who first imagined the rich potential that exists within theatrical spaces for researching all of the complexities of the human condition. We both have much to look forward to in the unfolding of ethnotheatre and the work it continues to inspire.

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