NYU | STEINHARDT

ARTSPRAXIS

ArtsPraxis Volume 10, Issue 1 looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. We welcomed traditional academic research as well as narratives of practice. The call for papers was released in concert with the publication of *ArtsPraxis* Volume 9, Issue 2. The submission deadline for Volume 10, Issue 1 was **March 1, 2023.**

Submissions fell under one of the following categories:
- Drama in Education (i.e., studies in drama/theatre curriculum, special education, integrated arts, assessment and evaluation)
- Applied Theatre (i.e., studies in community-based theatre, theatre of the oppressed, the teaching artist, diversity and inclusion)
- Theatre for Young Audiences and Youth Theatre (i.e., studies in acting, directing, dramaturgy, playwriting, dramatic literature, theatre technology, arts-based research methodologies)

Article submissions addressed the following questions:

Drama in Education
- How and why do we teach drama and theatre in schools and community settings?
- How do the roles and responsibilities of the teaching artist differ from those of the classroom teacher (primary, secondary or higher education)?
- What is the contemporary role of drama and theatre in arts education?
- How do we prepare future theatre artists and educators in the 21st century?
- What are innovative ways of devising original works and/or teaching theatre using various aesthetic forms, media, and/or technology?
- To what extent can the study of global theatre forms impact students' learning?
- To what extent should we distinguish theatre-making from drama as a learning medium?
- How can integrated-arts curricula facilitate teaching, learning and presenting the craft of theatre?
- How do we assess students' aesthetic understanding and awareness?
- What research supports the potential of drama as a learning medium?
- How do drama and theatre make connections across curricular content areas and beyond schools?
- How do drama and theatre education contribute to lifelong learning?
- What role do drama and theatre play in community agencies?

Applied Theatre
- How can drama provide a forum to explore ideas?
- What are innovative strategies for using drama to stimulate dialogue, interaction and change?
- How is theatre being used to rehabilitate people in prisons, health facilities, and elsewhere?
- How do we prepare future artists/educators for work in applied theatre?
- What ethical questions should the artist/educator consider in their work?
- In what ways are aesthetics important in applied theatre? How do we negotiate a commitment to both the process and product of applied theatre work?
- How do artist/educators assess participants' understandings in an applied theatre project?
- What are the major tensions in the field and how are these being addressed?
- To what extent has recent research on affect influenced community-based praxis?

Theatre for Young Audiences/Youth Theatre
- Theatre for young audiences is an international movement and the borders are breaking down so how do we present and respond to work from other countries?
- Who exactly are our new audiences—who are we talking to?
- Are we as brave as we think we are? How does what we think we should do relate to what we want to do as artists?
- Is the writer at the heart of future theatre creation? What has happened to dramaturgy in the brave new world of immersive, experiential, visual/physical theatre?
- Theatre for Young Audiences has always been in the forefront of theatrical innovation. So what is next?
- What have we learned about nurturing the artist of the future-- playwriting, theatre-making, performance?

- How do artists establish rigorous, intentional new works development processes that are innovative and sustainable?
- How does accountability serve the stakeholders in a new works development process?
- How do we define and measure success in theatre for young audiences?

We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists, educators, and scholars. Our goal was to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that will enrich the development of educational theatre in the coming years.

Call for Papers

Papers were to be no longer than 4,000 words, had to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conformed to APA style manual. For this issue, articles could include traditional academic scholarship and narratives of practice.

Reviewing Procedures

Each article was sent to two peer reviewers. They provided 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.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Jonathan P. Jones, New York University, Program in Educational Theatre, Pless Hall, 82 Washington Square East, Rm 223, New York, NY 10003, USA. Email: jonathan.jones@nyu.edu

ARTSPRAXIS

Volume 10   Issue 1   June 2023

Editorial: Get Woke

JONATHAN P. JONES

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Content Warning: Language and subject matter that may challenge follows. Proceed with caution.

A couple of years ago, I was asked to facilitate a guest workshop using process drama with recently-matriculated graduate students. Given the general political tumult the world over from autocratic strongmen and those who emulate them and the inescapable proliferation of hatred, bigotry, and intolerance, I invited the students to investigate their positionality as political actors. Inspired by the activism of the Parkland students who launched March for Our Lives[1] after surviving the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, I wondered what these graduate students might think about their future

---

[1] March for Our Lives was launched as a protest march in Washington, D.C. with numerous global solidarity marches to protest the government's inaction on gun violence. That initial march shares a name with a political action fund aimed at ending gun violence.

role as educators of students who were no longer willing to sit by while the adults in power were mired in inaction. It was at that first March for Our Lives event where survivor Emma González said, "They say us kids don't know what we're talking about. That we're too young to understand how the government works. We call B.S." (CNN, 2018). What might this generation's political motivations require of their teachers?

At the outset of the workshop. I asked the graduate students to stand in a circle. I explained that I was employing a convention called Cross the Circle which requires participants to listen to a prompt, and if it applies to them, they should cross the circle and move to a new place among their peers.

Cross the circle if you like theatre.
Cross the circle if you like music.
Cross the circle if you are having a good day.
Cross the circle if you are political.

The stillness that followed that last statement was palpable. For the graduate students, I don't think they considered it remarkable by any means, but I was aghast. It is often said that all theatre is political, but it should be noted consistently that **all teaching is political**—both in terms of what you choose to incorporate into your curriculum and what you choose to leave out. I'll grant you, the machinations of political parties, candidates, and representatives can be off-putting, but we play an integral role in that system too—whether through speaking out, calling in, voting, awakening and/or sustaining critical consciousness. *Or not.* And given the world as it is, choosing not to fully engage is not an option.

What happens when the majority keeps bending the knee to a violent, angry, radicalized minority? And what happens when corporations and organizations who have the power to step up, decide to "both-sides" it for the sake of profit and mollifying this minority that is always enraged? [...]. In some states that rhyme with 'lorida,' you apparently can't say 'gay' [...]. Don't say 'gay' because apparently saying 'gay' makes people uncomfortable [...]. The reality is: transgender kids are being harassed and bullied; Black people are being shot and killed; Asian-Americans are being targeted for COVID; women have lost a constitutionally-protected

right. (Trump & Ali, 2023, 22:00)

Wajahat Ali, multi-hyphenate commentator shared these observations last week, in response to a seemingly growing acquiesce among American corporations to the threat of (at best) boycott or (at worst) mob-violence from a vocal minority of right-wing extremists who insist on pushing their white-Christian nationalist views on the nation in a necessary effort to combat what some call the "woke-mind virus." Be it boycotts of *Sports Illustrated* for featuring Kim Petras, a trans-woman musician on a cover of their swimsuit edition (Skinner, 2023), Bud Light after Dylan Mulvaney, a trans-woman influencer, promoted the brand (Moreno, 2023), or retailer Target for selling gay-pride themed merchandise which they subsequently pulled from their shelves (Lavietes, 2023)—this is the cultural backdrop that prompted Ali (among others) to push back against this seeming-societal regression to a time when demonizing the LGBTQ+ community was socially acceptable. Gay pride celebrations are being curtailed. Drag queen story hours are canceled under threat of protest. And teachers and students alike are silenced for being who they are. And that's just scratching the surface given a decade of unimaginable slaughter—be that of Black Americans in bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston or grocery shopping at a Topps supermarket in Buffalo, LGBTQ+ at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, LatinX shoppers at Walmart in El Paso, Jewish worshippers at the tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh—I could go on. What does this milieu portend for drama educators?

TO WOKE, OR NOT TO WOKE

As defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, being 'woke' is to be "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (2023). The etymology of the term, however, has a rich history in Black-American vernacular. After conversation with linguist deandre miles-hercules, *Vox*'s Aja Romano distilled,

The earliest known examples of wokeness as a concept revolve around the idea of Black consciousness "waking up" to a new reality or activist framework and dates back to the early 20th century. In 1923, a collection of aphorisms and ideas by the Jamaican

philosopher and social activist Marcus Garvey included the summons "Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!" as a call to global Black citizens to become more socially and politically conscious. A few years later, the phrase "stay woke" turned up as part of a spoken afterword in the 1938 song "Scottsboro Boys," a protest song by Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter, a.k.a. Lead Belly. The song describes the 1931 saga of a group of nine Black teenagers in Scottsboro, Arkansas, who were accused of raping two white women. (Romano, 2020)

Of this phenomena, U.S. congresswoman Barbara Lee wrote, "We have a moral obligation to "stay woke," take a stand and be active; challenging injustices and racism in our communities and fighting hatred and discrimination wherever it rises" (2017). And it is this progressive social justice that those who promote an anti-woke agenda are pushing to suppress.

Whether it be legislative actions like Florida's "Don't say gay" bill to supposedly protect youth from being groomed by gay teachers or the proliferation of anti-trans bills, masquerading as protecting girls in bathrooms from imagined predators in women's clothing or trans-girl athletes besting their cis-female competitors, the anti-woke agenda is on the march. According to the American Psychological Association, "In 2022, anti-transgender student athletics bills were introduced in 29 states in the United States" (2023), which, when combined with "at least 18 states [that] have adopted laws or policies—including some blocked by courts—barring gender-affirming medical care" (Crary, 2023), irreparable harm is being inflicted on a vulnerable population.

Of course, it is not only the LGBTQ+ community that has been placed in the right-wing's political crosshairs. According to a report by the advocacy group PEN America (Meehan & Friedman, 2023), reported in *The New York Times,*

From July to December 2022, PEN found 1,477 cases of books being removed, up from 1,149 during the previous six months. [...] The numbers don't reflect the full scope of the efforts, since new mandates in some states requiring schools to vet all their reading material for potentially offensive content have led to mass removals of books, which PEN was unable to track, the report says. (Alter, 2023)

This so-called offensive content is sometimes as simple as an overt act of racism by a white character, though—of course—any appearance of an LGBTQ+ character or relationship is immediately suspect. Banned books have included Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (too brutally honest about the Holocaust), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (sexually explicit and, well, Black), Maia Kababe's *Gender Queer* (too queer), and the children's book *The Life of Rosa Parks* (it's just 'too woke').

In theatre, censoring performances follow suit (Paulson, 2023). In February, 2023, a production of *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at a Geauga County high school in Ohio "was canceled over concerns about *vulgarity*" (emphasis in the source; Stunson, 2023), though it had been the fourth-most-produced full-length musical in American high schools as recently as 2021 (EDTA, 2021). The school subsequently reversed its decision after considerable national media attention. In March 2023, school leaders at a high school in Fort Wayne, Indiana said, "the spring play *Marian: The True Tale of Robinhood* would not be moving forward [...] following a few calls from parents who were concerned about certain aspects of the play—such as a non-binary character and a same-sex couple" (Abbott, 2023). The student-performers subsequently raised funds to independently mount their production in a local theatre.

Whether it was Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign in South Florida in the 1970s to overturn a prohibition against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Frank, 2013) or the stain of Jim Crow, none of this is new—neither here in the U.S., nor globally. Books have been banned for centuries—and discriminatory measures that demonize marginalized communities proliferate human history. But just because it has been so, does not mean it should continue and if we don't 'get woke' or 'stay woke', those who promote this agenda will achieve their desired outcome. As noted above, this is happening across corporate America, but their success can be seen in other sectors as well. As reported in *The Washington Post*, "a study published by the Rand Corp. in January found that nearly one-quarter of a nationally representative sample of 8,000 English, math and science teachers reported revising their instructional materials to limit or eliminate discussions of race and gender" (Natanson, 2023). Facing administrative pushback, a Florida high school canceled their production of Paula Vogel's *Indecent* and replaced it with a more palatable choice, Chekhov's *The Seagull* (Masseron, 2023)*.*

We must be steadfast in our resolve that this organized assault on our civil liberties will not stand—that we will not go quietly into the slumber that some might intend. And if that makes you uncomfortable—if that is too confrontational for you—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has some words for you:

> I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice [...]. Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. [...]

> More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. (1963)

While Rev. Dr. King was advocating for white moderates to join in the fight for true emancipation of Black Americans, I implore those of you who are called to moderation and temperance to wake up. The time is ripe indeed, so join me in this righteous action.

WOKE IN THE CLASSROOM

What does it look like to be woke in the classroom? It is not about espousing a political ideology. Rather, it tasks you with creating a learning community that is grounded in liberation, equity, and justice. Woke in the classroom requires self-reflection. It requires you to consider your privilege before you speak—be that due to your race, gender, ethnicity, sexual-orientation, or otherwise. It requires you to

promote inquiry and critical consciousness. Woke in the classroom is where students know that you support them when the world outside seeks to oppress them. Here are three vignettes that suggest what that can look like in drama education.

la migra

I arrived a little late one morning to the high school where I was teaching. Such was the way when I didn't have a homeroom class to supervise prior to the start of the day. But as my first-period students began to file into the classroom, something was clearly amiss. Between my classroom and the next, there was a pass-through doorway—the kind you'll find in some adjoining hotel rooms—and some of my advanced drama students were hurrying between the rooms. It seemed, some major drama was afoot and they needed to gather more students for support.

Before things got too out of hand, I went through to the other classroom to find out what was going on. Without hesitation, a girl told me, Cheli's mom was picked up by immigration.

Growing up in the Northeastern U.S., immigration was a non-entity. Border patrol on the U.S./Canada border existed—you might sometimes encounter them on a long-distance bus or train if you were near the border—but otherwise, they were the stuff of television dramas and newscasts. Such was my privilege. But to anyone living in an immigrant community or within proximity to the U.S./Mexico border, "la migra" was something else entirely. A viper waiting in the shadows to strike out against an unsuspecting victim at any moment. And on that day, the victim was Cheli's mom.

Given my naiveté, I needed information. As my class was just about to get underway, I returned to my own classroom, shut the door. And called the class to attention.

"OK, I know I am legally not allowed to ask any of you about your immigration status—and I'm not asking you about that now—but we have an emergency situation and I need information. If immigration picks you up—what does that mean? How does it happen? Where do they take you? And what can you do about it?"

My impulse was to find an immigration attorney and get the mom out of detention—but was that even possible? The students were quickly forthcoming with information as this was a scenario with which they were all too familiar. This amounted to a migrant being taken away to a

processing center, then sent to a temporary detention facility out of state, and ultimately being deported. And without major funds to disrupt this sequence, there was nothing to do but hope they could return at some point in the future. As they say, case closed.

Cheli was 18 years old at the time and within a few months of her graduation. And as she lived only with her mom, she was now alone. I couldn't make sense of the cruelty of the situation. Indeed Cheli was an 'adult'—but she didn't work and was left by a broken immigration system to fend for herself.

I thanked my students and put on a video—no 'teaching' was happening that day though there would be plenty of learning. I spent the better part of the day working with colleagues and students to figure out living arrangements for Cheli and making sure she would be taken care of. Cheli had been in my classes every year that she was in high school. She was in every show. She features in every memory of my time at that school. We were like family. And to quote her favorite film, she was ohana—a Hawaiian term that means family, and "Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten" (Sanders & DeBlois, 2002).

let's hear them sing

I taught at that same high school for a number of years and I could never comprehend the visual segregation in the quad at lunch time. All the Black kids congregated in the breezeway outside of the auditorium. The Armenian kids held court directly behind the main building. And then a vast sea of LatinX students covered the space between. Given the large immigrant community at the school, there were language and cultural differences that contributed to this scene, but what alarmed me was that no one acknowledged this self-imposed segregation. Over the years, I asked the students about this phenomena and they insisted that this is just how it was—they wanted to be with their friends who just happened to share their racial or ethnic makeup. This reality was not shared by all students on campus as there were many diverse sanctuaries that called to students whose interests guided their social groups. Students participating in the science bowl were hidden away in a classroom. The marching band were isolated in the music bungalow. Small Learning Communities had dedicated space with their faculty advisors. My people—the Entertainment and Media Academy—were no different, huddled together in their safe space in room 184. But for everyone who didn't gravitate to these special interest groups, they were relegated to

the segregation tableau in the quad. And no one talked about it. No one questioned it. Only me. It was with this segregation in mind that I elected to direct *West Side Story*--what I imagined to be a necessary commentary on what this school community seemed to ignore.

The show selection was not controversial, but one casting choice was. Nearly 90 students auditioned for the show. There'd been a two-year gap since the last musical production, so those who needed a theatrical outlet were primed for this moment—but also, this particular material really resonated with this population of students—resulting in this great turn-out of talent. It took two or three days to see everyone. I was committed to casting every eligible student, but given the material, we needed a few strong singers to make it work. As we made our way through the auditions, it became evident that we needed one more voice—and as the last student auditioned, it was clear that the requisite voice was not there.

A bit bereft, I huddled with my colleagues. *What would we do?* You can't do Bernstein's score without a voice. And in the midst of this, we overheard some commotion in the hall outside of the audition room. So I went out to investigate—it seemed there was yet one more student who wanted to audition. The commotion was that their peers supported the idea and their teacher was entirely opposed. You see, in the U.S., many students with documented special needs are permitted to stay in secondary school until they are 21-years-old if they need the time to complete their graduation requirements. This was one such student. And after 6 years navigating the student's many challenges and unreliability, their teacher basically forbade them to audition.

I didn't know the student. I didn't know the history. What I knew was—I needed a voice—but more, as this student had been so publicly rejected by this faculty member, I had to intervene. "Well, let's hear them sing," I said. And as anyone who's ever worked in theatre will know, a tear-inducing voice that only the muses could provide emanated from this young performer. They got the part.

I had a meeting with the student before I posted the cast list. I asked if they thought their teacher's concerns were valid. They responded in the affirmative. As such, I knew there would be much work to do, but their admission demonstrated their integrity. I let them know that I believed in them—and that 85 other students would be relying on them to do their part. My colleague insisted on contingencies—a performer contract, understudies, accountability measures—othering this student

all the more. But I remained determined. And four months later, the student delivered a triumphal performance, vindicating what I knew to be the right thing to do.

it gets better

In my 2021 editorial [Into the Traumaverse](#), I shared an excerpt from *Voices*, a devised theatre piece that I helped create and perform for the NYU LGBT Center. The piece was crafted from questionnaire data from young, queer adults reflecting on their experiences growing up gay. A portion of that excerpt follows:

> JONATHAN
> In Spanish class, though, it got personal. This kid (whose name I have thankfully no memory of) harassed me literally every day that he was there. I sat in the first row, first seat. He sat in the third row, first seat. He would rest his head on his hand facing me and for forty minutes every day he would question me...
>
> THIS KID
> Do you know that you're gay?
>
> (*beat*)
>
> What's it like to take it up the ass?
>
> (*beat*)
>
> Don't you know that being gay is wrong?
>
> (*beat*)
>
> You probably have AIDS. Why do I have to sit in class with someone with AIDS?
>
> (*beat*)
>
> What's wrong? Ain't you got nothing to say? Fucking faggot.

JONATHAN
...Every day. For the entire year. My teacher, Mr. Corcos, would at times say:

MR. CORCOS
You, third row, first seat, be quiet.

JONATHAN
Or

MR. CORCOS
You, third row, first seat, go to the office.

JONATHAN
But for the most part, it would just go on.

THIS KID
Fucking faggot.

JONATHAN
One of the kids from my elementary school was also in the class. He sat right behind me.

ONE OF THE KIDS
Why don't you defend yourself? Why do you let him talk to you that way?

JONATHAN
I don't need to stoop to his level, I replied.

That's pretty much how I always acted then: very tough skin and hard to get through to. It didn't affect me. I saw high school as a necessary evil (gym class too). Something that I had to suffer through, but no matter how awful, it was only four years. So who cares what they say? Who cares what they think? All that matters is what I think. (Jones et al., 2003)

This piece is never far from my mind given that it included a number of personal anecdotes from my youth—and the performance of this text

was the first time that I'd spoken publicly about the bullying and homophobia that I experienced as a young person. While I was teaching high school, I kept copies of this script in a filing cabinet in my classroom. I didn't know when or if it would become useful in my teaching, but I kept it close at hand, just in case.

Every couple of months, my colleagues and I took a group of students to see a staged reading, produced by Bonnie Franklin's Classic and Contemporary American Plays, a non-profit dedicated to sharing free theatre with professional actors for public school students. One spring afternoon, I'd just returned to campus from one such field trip. My classroom was empty and I was gathering materials to prepare for an after-school rehearsal. As I busied myself, one of my students came running through the door.

"Mr. Jones, you need to come quick. Aram is crying in the theatre. On the way back from the trip, some kids on the bus were harassing him and calling him a faggot."

Without hesitation, I dropped what I was doing and followed the concerned student into the theatre. When we went through the stage door, I saw that there was a small group of students sitting together, consoling Aram. As he wasn't alone, I purposefully returned to my classroom, went directly to the filing cabinet, grabbed the waiting pile of scripts, and took them back to the theatre. I arranged the students into a circle, assigned roles, and we read the script together.

As we read, the students were asking, "Is this 'Jonathan' you?" I hushed them and pushed them to keep reading. About eight pages in, a character says, "No one who likes Madonna that much could possibly be gay" (Jones et al., 2003)—at that point, they all laughed—as they then knew it was definitely me. As we made our way toward the excerpt recounted above, their initial laughter turned to somber recognition.

This was about five years before the "It Gets Better" campaign was launched by Dan Savage and Terry Miller wherein this gay couple posted a video online in which they "talked about the bullying and rejection they experienced as gay teens, and how life got better for them in the years after high school" (Compton, 2020). The couple posted the video in response to a spate of high-profile suicides by gay teenagers in the U.S. In the ten years following the release of their viral video in 2010, more than 70,000 such videos were posted online to echo and amplify their message. And it was with that same intention that I brought those scripts to the theatre that day to share with Aram and his peers—to tell

them not only that it gets better, but also to say that I had been there too—I understood the hurt and the shame. And after we supported him in this immediate moment, **we would act**. I was prone to say in those days, "Preach your hate in your church if you like, but keep it out of my classroom"—and though this incident didn't happen in my classroom, its impact had seeped its way in nonetheless—and that would not be tolerated. So with steel in his spine, we walked with Aram from the theatre to the main office in solidarity as he formally reported the incident so that the perpetrators could be held accountable.

NOW YOU DO IT

As I recall these moments, trust that I am not patting myself on the back. Rather, I am castigating myself for not doing enough—for being reactive rather than proactive in each of these situations. But what I know is that there was no conceivable world in which I would have been presented with these challenges and responded, "I'm just here to teach drama. It's not my place to intervene." Not me. Not then. Not now. Not ever. Push away whatever conscious or unconscious thoughts that might be holding you back. The forces against us are relentless and we must face that head on. Though it may be a platitude, the quote attributed to William Johnsen rings true—you must believe, "If it is to be, it is up to me." And that doesn't mean you need to organize a protest (though you could). It doesn't mean you need to take to the streets (though you could, as students in Sarasota, Florida did to speak out against the Don't Say Gay bill [Lieberman, 2022]). It doesn't mean you have to make public comment at your local school board meeting (though you could). The teacher who keeps a drawer full of emergency snacks for students they know are missing meals when the conservatives cut funding is doing their part. And if, like me, you worry after that you didn't do enough—let that push you to do more the next time. They want you to be pacified. They want you to be cowed into silence. They want you asleep. And in light of this, I implore you: wake up!

IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, our contributors document and reflect on innovative educational theatre practices. **Joe Salvatore** interrogates a

methodology for verbatim performance, a form which asks an audience to critically engage with data from interviews and media artifacts via a presentational acting style that can include portraying across identity. **Scott Welsh**, **Elnaz Sheshgelani**, and **Mary-Rose McLaren** describes a ten-year exploration of the self and social experience which fused together two disparate theatrical forms, Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, to create an intercultural hybrid performance medium. **Christine V. Skorupa** advocates for expanding access for neurodiverse audiences, proposing a Universal Design for Theatregoing based upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning. **David Allen** and **Agata Handley** mine unpublished documentary evidence from Dorothy Heathcote's archive in which she created a space for "response-ability" through a series of "focussed encounters with 'otherness'." **Victoria Isotti** proposes methods for using creative drama in support of social-emotional learning for young children. Finally, **Alex Ates** deconstructs three collaborations with professional playwrights who developed new works for young people in order to overcome the discontinuities between plays for the professional stage and the artistic needs of diverse, school-based theatre production.

LOOKING AHEAD

Having recently concluded another thought-provoking dialogue at the 2023 NYU Forum on Collective Visioning, our next issue (Volume 10, Issue 2) will focus on articles under that same heading. We invite members of the Educational Theatre field to submit works that will share ideas, vocabularies, strategies, and techniques, centering on varying definitions and practices. That issue will publish in late 2023. Thereafter, look to the Verbatim Performance Lab for outreach and innovation from the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre as well as a Symposium on Research and Scholarship to be presented in collaboration with the American Alliance for Theatre and Education in 2024.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Jones, J. P. (2023). Editorial: Get woke. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. i-xix.

REFERENCES

Abott, E. (2023, May 10). Indiana school cancels play with LGBTQ characters so students produce it themselves. *WFYI, Indianapolis News.*

Alter, A. (2023, April 20). Book bans rising rapidly in the U.S., free speech groups find. *The New York Times.*

American Psychological Association. (2023, January). Transgender exclusion in sports: Background.

CNN. (2018, February 17). Florida student Emma Gonzalez to lawmakers and gun advocates: 'We call BS'.

Cooper, J. (2020, September 21). 'It Gets Better': How a viral video fueled a movement for LGBTQ youth. *NBC News.*

Crary, D. (2023). Wave of anti-transgender bills in Republican-led states divides U.S. faith leaders. *PBS News Hour.*

Educational Theatre Association (EDTA). (2021, July 6). 2021 play survey.

Frank, G. (2013). "The Civil Rights of Parents": Race and conservative politics in Anita Bryant's campaign against gay rights in 1970s Florida. *Journal of the History of Sexuality, 22* (1), pp. 126–160.

Jones, J. P. et al. (2003). *Voices.* [Unpublished manuscript]. Program in Educational Theatre, NYU Steinhardt.

Jones, J. P. (2021). Editorial: Into the traumaverse. *ArtsPraxis*, *8* (1), pp. i-xviii.

King, Jr., M. L. (1963, April 16). Letter from a Birmingham jail.

Lavietes, M. (2023, June 13). Starbucks denies union's accusation of banning Pride decorations. *NBC News.*

Lee, B. (2017, June 13). Resisting the rise of hatred in the era of Trump. Originally published in *Essence.*

Lieberman, H. (2022, November 18). How the "Don't Say Gay" law is affecting Florida LGBTQ students and teachers. *BuzzFeed News.*

Masseron, M. (2023, January 7). Florida high school cancels production of *Indecent*; Students say it's because of 'Don't Say Gay' laws. *Playbill.com.*

Meehan, K. & Friedman, J. (2023, April 20). Banned in the USA: State laws supercharge book suppression in schools. *PEN America.*

Merriam-Webster. (2023). Woke.

Moreno, J. E. (2023, June 14). Bud Light is no longer America's top-selling beer after boycott. *The New York Times.*

Natanson, H. (2023, March 6). 'Slavery was wrong' and 5 other things some educators won't teach anymore. *The Washington Post.*

Paulson, M. (2023, July 4). It's getting hard to stage a school play without political drama. *The New York Times.*

Romano, A. (2020, October 9). A history of "wokeness" - Stay woke: How a Black activist watchword got co-opted in the culture war. *Vox.*

Sanders, C. & DeBlois, D. (Directors). (2002). *Lilo & Stitch* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures.

Stunson, M. (2023, February 2). Broadway stars speak out after high school musical canceled in Ohio over 'vulgarity'. *Miami Herald.*

Skinner, A. (2023, May 16). *Sports Illustrated* under fire for transgender model on cover. *Newsweek.*

Trump, M. L. (Host) & Ali, W. (Guest). (2023, June 7). Imminent? (No. 129) [Audio podcast episode]. In *The Mary Trump show*. Politicon.

Walters, J. (2023, May 24). 'Threats' prompt US Target stores to remove some Pride Collection products. *The Guardian.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan P. Jones, PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is an administrator, faculty member, coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor at NYU Steinhardt. He serves on the editorial board for *Applied Theatre Research* and *Youth Theatre Journal,* and on the board of directors as well as chair of Research and Scholarship for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) where he has recently been elected Chair-Elect and will serve as Chair from 2025-2027.

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Elsewhere in Elsinore, Dorothy Rides the Rainbow, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bye Bye Birdie, The Laramie Project, Grease, Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, his courses have included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Early in his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include "And So We Write": Reflective Practice

in Ethnotheatre and Devised Theatre Projects in *LEARNing Landscapes, 14* (2), 2022, Let Them Speak: Devised Theatre as a Culturally Responsive Methodology for Secondary Students in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People* (edited by Selina Busby, Charlene Rajendran, and Kelly Freebody; 2022), *Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor* (2019), and Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Mattson) in *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls* (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019). His book *Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach* will be published by Routledge in the coming year.

Recent speaking engagements include panel moderation for AATE's 2022 Leaders of Color Institute (Cultivating Spaces for LOC in Educational and 'Professional' Theatre Settings - Opening Keynote with Daphnie Sicre and José Casas), workshop facilitation for the 2022 AATE National Conference (*Biblioburro*: Children around the World Access Books through Story Drama) and Theatre in Our Schools (Locating Order in the Chaos: Revisiting Assessment in the Drama Classroom [2022] and Stage to Page: Reimagining the Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship [2021]), featured guest spots on Fluency with Dr. Durell Cooper Podcast, speaking about Origins, Inspirations, and Aspirations, and Conversations in Social Justice Podcast, York St. John University, speaking about Activism and Race within University Teaching and Research (2021); panel moderation for Theatre in Our Schools (Stage to Page: Reimagining the Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship) and the AATE National Conference (Pandemic Positives: What Do We Keep? Looking Backwards to Move Forward); an invited lecture on Performance as Activism at the Research-Based Theater Seminar, Washington, D.C. Citizen Diplomacy Fund Rapid Response COVID-19 Research-Based Theater Project, The COVID Monologues, part of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund for US Alumni Rapid Response made possible by the US Department of State and Partners of the Americas (2020); a keynote lecture on Drama and Education: Why and How for the Drama and Education Conference, Shanghai, China (2020); and an invited lecture, On Creativity, for the University of Anbar, Iraq (2020). Upcoming engagements include workshop facilitation at the 2023 AATE National Conference and co-facilitation with David Montgomery at the 2023 Dorothy Heathcote NOW conference in Aberdeen, Scotland.

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Verbatim Performance and Its Possibilities

JOE SALVATORE

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Verbatim performance catalyzes critical engagement in audiences while fostering empathy in ethnoactors and audiences. As an arts-based research modality, verbatim performance asks an audience to critically engage with data from interviews and media artifacts via a presentational acting style that can include portraying across identity. Ethnoactors make empathic connections to the real people they portray through close analysis and replication of speech and gestural patterns. This article situates verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool and connects it with ethnodrama and ethnotheatre while distinguishing it from verbatim theatre. Verbatim performance and associated terminology are defined and linked to the artistic practices and theoretical writings of Anna Deavere Smith and Bertolt Brecht. The article describes the origin and creation of NYU Steinhardt's Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL), shares VPL's mission, and offers three examples of VPL projects from the last five years: The Kavanaugh Files, The Serena Williams Project, and Whatever You

Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall.

As an arts-based methodological tool, verbatim performance invites actors and audiences to engage with qualitative data in powerful ways that can shift assumptions and biases. Through an actor's close study of speech and gestural patterns and then precise replication of those patterns for an audience, verbatim performance creates possibilities for empathy and critical engagement, two states of mind we desperately need more of in our contemporary society. By sharing my personal history with the form, defining key terminology, connecting artistic practices and research modalities, and offering examples of projects from NYU's Verbatim Performance Lab, I make the case that verbatim performance offers unique and disruptive possibilities for artists, researchers, and audiences alike.

ORIGINS

I first encountered what I have come to call verbatim performance in 1995 as a graduate student pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Theater with a concentration in dramaturgy and directing at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (UMASS). I was a teaching assistant for a large introductory theatre course for non-majors taught by Harley Erdman. On the syllabus for the course, Erdman included Anna Deavere Smith's play *Fires in the Mirror*, which I had never heard of, but read in preparation for the lecture Erdman would give. I noticed how Smith had formatted the play's text, like poetry on the page, rather than the usual prose I read in more traditional scripts. Erdman also arranged for the class to screen the teleplay adaptation Smith had filmed for PBS's American Playhouse series (American Playhouse, 1993). As I sat in the back of the lecture hall watching Smith's performance, I was stunned by her virtuosity as she moved through multiple nuanced portraits of the 20-plus people she had interviewed about the incidents that unfolded in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, following the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum in August 1991. I had never experienced a performer with this much dexterity, nor had I been compelled to reflect so deeply on so many different perspectives in one performance. The analytical part

of my brain fired throughout the screening, and I made immediate connections to my undergraduate thesis work on Bertolt Brecht, his epic theatre, and Verfremdungseffekt.

The following semester (spring 1996), I enrolled in a graduate seminar, World Drama: Contemporary Movements, taught by Roberta Uno, the founder and artistic director of New WORLD Theater at UMASS (1979-2010) and a faculty member in the Department of Theater. New WORLD Theater presented and produced work by and about people of color, and Uno curated a series of visits to our class from artists she had programmed for New WORLD's season. Uno also included Anna Deavere Smith's work on the course and gave us an assignment that changed my life: conduct an interview with someone and transcribe it the way Smith transcribed her interviews in the published version of *Fires in the Mirror*. I had chosen to focus on queer theory and queer theatre movements in that class, so I interviewed a gay friend-of-a-friend about his experiences. I loved everything about this assignment. I loved the interviewing process, the transcribing, and the precision of documenting every vocal sound and cadence break. And the appearance of the transcription on the page appealed to me, as it seemed to map out the thought patterns of the speaker, not so different from the way Shakespeare's text provides the same clues.

Twenty-seven years after conducting that first interview, I now identify as an artist-researcher whose work lives at the hyphen between those two identities. Larger questions I have about the world have always driven my artistic work, so while many artists might not think of themselves as researchers, I do. I create live performances and video projects from interview-based data, found media artifacts, and historical events, and my work falls under the broad umbrella of arts-based research (ABR). Leavy (2020) establishes that:

> ABR *practices* are a set of methodological tools used by researchers across disciplines during any and all phases of research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (p. 4, italics in original)

Within ABR, I categorize my work as ethnodrama, defined by Saldaña

(2011) as "a written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts" (p. 13). The performance of an ethnodrama, known as ethnotheatre, "employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance of participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 12).

WHAT IS VERBATIM PERFORMANCE?

My preferred methodological tool within ethnodrama and ethnotheatre is *verbatim performance*, which I define as "the precise portrayal of an actual person using their exact speech and gestural patterns as a data source for investigation, literally word for word and gesture for gesture" (Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). I use "verbatim" as an adjective to describe the performance style and embrace its literal dictionary definition meaning: "using *exactly* the same words that were originally used" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023, italics my emphasis). I include gestures as they were originally used whenever possible because I disseminate my research findings through embodied performance. I use verbatim performance to share data collected from interviews that I conduct about a particular topic. I also use verbatim performance to present discoveries drawn from investigations of found media artifacts like recordings of political debates, hearings, testimonies, and even exchanges during sporting events.

While verbatim performance as a form relies on the precise and strict adherence to the words and gestures of the source material, *verbatim theatre* tends to be defined more openly. For example, Clare Summerskill (2021) defines verbatim theatre as "a dramatic production based on spoken experiences shared by people who have been interviewed about a particular subject or theme" and acknowledges that verbatim theatre manifests differently depending on the artist and the context within which they work (p. 8). Other practitioners identify verbatim theatre as a technique allowing more liberties with the source material. For example, verbatim theatre playwright Robin Soans states, "Just because I write about real people and seek to portray them honestly, is there an embargo on editing creatively?" (Hammond and

Steward, p. 35, 2008), and I counter that yes, there is (Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). When discussing verbatim theatre as a technique, Hammond and Steward (2008) write that:

> The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records, such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged, or re-contextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used. In this sense, verbatim is not a form, it is a technique, it is a means rather than an end. (p. 9)

In response, I posit that using the term "verbatim" to describe a technique that does not stay true to the definition of "using exactly the same words that were originally used" is problematic and creates confusion for theatre makers, researchers, and audiences alike. Hence, this article attempts to resolve that potential for confusion by establishing verbatim performance as a methodological tool for artist-researchers that stays true to the definition of "verbatim."

My verbatim performance practice emerged from my initial encounters with Smith's work, the inspiration it provided, and my subsequent training and experiences as a theatremaker. While I never studied with Smith directly, I studied and read her work extensively and saw her performances on video and in person. As a result, I developed my methodological approach to creating verbatim performance using the knowledge and insight gained from those experiences. Like Smith, I interview participants about a historical or cultural moment or phenomenon, transcribe selections from those interviews, and craft them into a performance script. However, whereas Smith typically performs her work as a solo artist, I enlist a company of actors to perform the script selections verbatim. The actors construct their performances using three pieces of data: a scored transcript notating the cadence of the original speaker, the audio or video of the interview, and written field notes collected following the interview. Through a close study of these three data pieces, actors work to replicate each participant's original speech and gestural patterns with as much precision as possible in their performances (Salvatore, 2018, 2020;

Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). The verbatim replication draws on Smith's (1993) awareness "that by using another person's language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual" (p. xxxii). Because my verbatim performance practice focuses on analyzing an individual's speech and gestural patterns and using that knowledge to reveal "the invisible," it demonstrates a significant capacity as an investigative arts-based research tool.

My verbatim performance practice also draws inspiration from Smith's portrayal of her interview participants. In her one-woman performances, Smith plays all interview participants selected for inclusion in her script. As a result, she frequently portrays someone of another race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, age, ability, or orientation different from her own. Traditional theatre practitioners might refer to this as "casting against type," but I refer to it as *portraying across identity*. My use of "across" draws inspiration from Smith's (1993) articulation of the spirit of theatre and the potential of the actor:

> If only a man can speak for a man, a woman for a woman, a Black person for all Black people, then we, once again, inhibit the *spirit* of theater, which lives in the *bridge* that makes unlikely aspects *seem* connected. The bridge doesn't make them the same, it merely *displays* how two unlikely *aspects are related*. These relationships of the *unlikely*, these connections of things that don't fit together are crucial to American theater and culture if theater and culture plan to help us assemble our obvious differences. The self-centered technique [of acting] has taken the bridge out of the process of creating character, it has taken metaphor out of acting. It has made the heart smaller, the spirit less gregarious, and the mind less apt to hold on to contradictions or opposition. (pp. xxviii–xxix, italics in original)

Extending Smith's metaphor of the bridge, verbatim performance becomes a pathway for an actor to potentially empathize with someone else's perspective, thus expanding their worldview. Gaining empathy for someone's perspective does not mean suddenly agreeing with them or having more positive feelings toward them. However, an actor might gain additional awareness, sensitivity, or understanding of another person's perspective. The actor does not become an expert on

that person's experience, nor can they suddenly proclaim to speak for that person. However, verbatim performance can potentially expand the actor's views about a perspective different from their own. Through his own experiences with the form, Indigenous performing artist and scholar Blayne Welsh referred to the verbatim performance process as "learning lines to understand" rather than learning lines only to perform (Blayne Welsh, Wailwan people of North West New South Wales, Australia, personal communication, June 17, 2020). Welsh's articulation of that distinction between *understanding* and *performing* highlights the investigative nature of verbatim performance and further supports my case for its use as an arts-based methodological tool.

As verbatim performance requires a close study of speech and gestural patterns, rather than simply saying that an actor performs or portrays a role, I assert that the actor *investigates and performs* the words and gestures of the person they portray. I also refer to an actor who works in verbatim performance as an *ethnoactor,*[1] a term coined by drama therapist Darci Burch (2019) that nods to ethnodrama, ethnotheatre, and the larger field of ethnography. Burch writes:

> The [ethnoactor] is challenged to create a portrayal that maintains the dignity of and respect for the interviewee while maintaining room for new discovery of knowledge and understanding. They must be conscious in their choices to avoid caricature, misrepresentation, or falsehood in their performance. The [ethnoactor] is charged with the ability to have empathy for the person/role they perform in order to truthfully render the performance of the individual. (Burch, 2019, p. 29)

Because an ethnoactor engages in the detailed observation and careful study required by verbatim performance, they then translate their new awareness into a precise performance of speech pattern, and they are likely to begin to breathe like the person they are investigating and performing. Speaking and breathing like another person brings the ethnoactor closest to achieving the clichéd walk in someone else's shoes. That shift away from their own breathing pattern and towards someone else's has physiological implications that

---

[1] Burch hyphenates this word as "ethno-actor," whereas I choose to drop the hyphen to align it more closely with the terms *ethnodrama* and *ethnotheatre* which are not hyphenated.

can offer the ethnoactor new knowledge about the person they are portraying. The ethnoactor must also embrace the possibility of gaining new understanding and empathy for a new perspective they could disagree with. I encourage ethnoactors engaging in verbatim performance to *enter with curiosity,*[2] to remain open to what they might discover about the person they are investigating and performing, and also to what they might learn about themselves, their preconceived notions, and their implicit biases.

Verbatim performance can also bridge art-making with sense-making for audiences, as its primary goal is to catalyze critical engagement and heighten awareness in audiences rather than achieve the emotional catharsis characteristic in more traditional theatrical performances that rely on realism and representational performance styles. An audience's heightened awareness relates to Bertolt Brecht's concept of Verfremdungseffekt or "defamiliarization," a technique that uses theatrical devices to act as a "political intervention into the (blindingly) familiar" to disrupt an audience's emotional catharsis (Mumford, 2018, p. 61).

Verbatim performance asks an audience to critically engage with data from interviews and media artifacts via a presentational acting style that can include portraying across identity. Verbatim performance also features moments where the ethnoactors engage with the audience as themselves, making the audience aware of the investigative and analytical intentions of the performance. For example, a live verbatim performance may feature an ethnoactor announcing the chosen identifier for each participant as they begin to speak for the first time. The ethnoactor portraying that participant dons a costume piece in full view of the audience that represents the participant. We refer to this costume piece as a *talisman.* The audience maintains an awareness of the theatricality of the moment because they have witnessed the ethnoactor's transformation via their donning of the talisman. Another approach to catalyzing a critical mindset is establishing *rules of engagement* with an audience from the top of a performance (Salvatore, 2018). In this case, the ethnoactors might introduce the performance as an investigation and deploy a focus question for the audience to consider as they experience it. In a recorded verbatim performance, information about the investigation,

---

[2] This phrase comes from Jonathan Angelilli, my longtime trainer, teacher, and coach.

including the focus question, can be conveyed using title slides and voiceover tracks. Ethnoactors may also use a talisman to move in and out of their portrayals in a filmed verbatim performance, depending on the project and its intentions. Regardless of the format, verbatim performance strives to achieve one of Brecht's key goals:

> What we are looking for is a kind of representation in which the familiar is striking, the normal amazing. Everyday things should appear strange, and much that seemed natural should be recognized as artificial. If you give an unfamiliar quality to the actions, then all that they lose is a familiarity that is derived from fresh naïve observation. (Brecht, quoted in Barnett, 2015, p. 76)

By presenting an audience with a precise replication of the original source material but through the voice and body of another, verbatim performance can evoke, provoke, and disrupt an audience's preconceived notions and understandings (Leavy, 2020). The ability to catalyze critical engagement in audiences while fostering empathy in ethnoactors and audiences makes verbatim performance a powerful methodological tool filled with possibilities.

NYU'S VERBATIM PERFORMANCE LAB: A SITE OF POSSIBILITIES

Verbatim performance is the primary methodological tool used for the arts-based research conducted in the Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL), a project of the Program in Educational Theatre in the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. VPL investigates and performs words and gestures collected from found media artifacts and interview-based data. Found media artifacts refer to video or audio clips of important contemporary or historical moments. Interview-based data refer to interviews we conduct with participants about a particular topic. A central research question grounds each VPL project and its verbatim performance inquiry. Regardless of the source material, VPL aims to disrupt assumptions, biases, and intolerances across a spectrum of political, cultural, and social narratives.

VPL uses the word "narratives" intentionally because we believe

that much of the media we consume is constructed, mediated, and manipulated. As a result, audiences may not always be entirely clear about what they are experiencing. We also believe that the same holds true for how we consume individuals in our daily interactions. Social media has trained us to scroll and click through information quickly, and that rapid data consumption has carried over into our day-to-day, real-time interactions. Through its verbatim performance investigations, VPL tries to disrupt that consumption process by slowing it down. Slower consumption forces actors and audiences to pay closer attention to what is said and how it is said so that they can see, hear, and process the actual content rather than jumping to pre-conceived opinions and conclusions grounded in assumptions and implicit biases. In his 2019 Spencer Lecture for the American Educational Research Association entitled "Rhetoric and Social Science in a Polarized Society," sociologist Mario L. Small (2019) defined qualitative literacy as "the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence" and named its importance in relation to polarization, social science, and public discourse. Small argued that contemporary society exhibits a deficiency in qualitative literacy, as demonstrated by the struggle to determine the difference between fact and opinion because of how those different forms of information are presented and interpreted. VPL promotes qualitative literacy amongst actors and audiences through arts-based research investigations and performances.

VPL emerged following the success of *Her Opponent,*[3] a verbatim performance of excerpts from the 2016 U.S. presidential debates with gender-reversed casting, wherein Donald Trump was portrayed by a woman and Hillary Clinton by a man. I co-created that piece with economist Maria Guadalupe (INSEAD) (Guadalupe & Salvatore, 2017). The project premiered in January 2017 at NYU's Provincetown Playhouse and then moved to an Off-Broadway run at The Jerry Orbach Theater in New York City. The production received a nomination for an Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Unique Theatrical Experience (2017). In addition, it garnered national coverage from NPR, *The New York Times* (Soloski, 2017), *The Guardian* (Jamieson, 2017), Fox News, MSNBC, and ABC News, among others, and was referenced again in media coverage of the

---

[3] An archival version of *Her Opponent* can be viewed at www.heropponent.com

2020 presidential and vice-presidential debates (Gupta, 2020; Kurtzleben, 2020). After each performance, audiences engaged in a facilitated discussion to share what they experienced. We discovered that the verbatim performance methodology of word-for-word and gesture-for-gesture replication by the ethnoactors and the gender reversal allowed for a deeper critical analysis of the debates and subsequent election results.

The experiences with *Her Opponent* inspired me to create the Verbatim Performance Lab in August 2017.[4] Since its inception, VPL has created over 25 video and live performance projects exploring a range of events and topics and facilitated outreach and education programs throughout the United States. As a result, VPL has become a space to experiment with a sustained verbatim performance practice focused on research and audience engagement to approach societal challenges like media literacy, implicit bias, and political polarization. Using the methodology developed through years of interview-based projects, I have transitioned that knowledge within VPL to create more projects that use media artifacts as source material, emulating the style of verbatim performance established with *Her Opponent*. Below I offer three examples of projects, two with media artifacts and one with interviews, that VPL has created over its first five years. Within these short case studies, I have hyperlinked the project titles for ease of locating videos and additional information about the projects on VPL's website and YouTube channel.

The Kavanaugh Files

In September 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward with allegations that she had been sexually assaulted by then-Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh when they were both teenagers. The allegations prompted a second set of hearings conducted by the Senate Judiciary Committee on September 27, 2018 (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). In Fall 2018, VPL collaborated with NYU-TV to create *[The Kavanaugh Files](#)* (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2019), a series of five investigations of moments from the hearings using gender-flipped verbatim performance. Those moments included excerpts from the opening statements of Dr. Ford and Judge

---

[4] The author thanks NYU Steinhardt's Associate Dean Lindsay Wright for this thought-partnering moment and for her ongoing support of the Verbatim Performance Lab.

Kavanaugh, a sequence of Dr. Ford being questioned by attorney Rachel Mitchell, an excerpt of Senator Lindsay Graham's comments to Judge Kavanaugh, and an exchange between Senator Amy Klobuchar and Judge Kavanaugh (C-SPAN, 2018). The completed VPL series premiered online beginning on January 14, 2019, with a new clip released each day leading up to the 2019 Women's March on January 19, to instigate continued awareness, contemplation, and action and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the implications gender violence has on our day-to-day interactions and our larger political, cultural, and social worlds.

Geva Theatre Center, located in Rochester, New York, presented a live version of *The Kavanaugh Files* as part of its Hornet's Nest series on May 20, 2019. Following the performance, audience members participated in a facilitated dialogue with Geva's Literary Director and Resident Dramaturg Jenni Werner, myself, VPL associate director Keith R. Huff, and performers Heleya de Barros, Daryl Embry, Analisa Gutierrez-Morán, Suzy Jane Hunt, Scott Michael Morales, and Robert Thaxton-Stevenson.[5] The live performance lasted 35 minutes, and the Geva Theatre audience members engaged in a dialogue for over an hour until the host finally called the evening to an end. The performance and the conversation once again demonstrated the capacity for verbatim performance to catalyze an audience to engage with complex and controversial material critically. The live performance of *The Kavanaugh Files* received two additional public performances on NYU's campus: as part of a Constitution Day celebration in September 2019 and a program sponsored by the Birnbaum Women's Leadership Network at NYU Law School in March 2020.

The Serena Williams Project

On September 8, 2018, Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka played in the U.S. Open Women's Tennis Final. The match was marked by controversy when chair umpire Carlos Ramos awarded code violations to Williams for coaching, racket abuse, and verbal abuse. While arguing with Ramos and other officials, Williams stated that she was treated differently because she was a woman. After Williams received a point penalty and a game penalty, Osaka went on to win the match

---

[5] Rachel Tuggle Whorton and Stephanie Anderson have also performed in iterations of *The Kavanaugh Files.*

6-2, 6-4 (Waldstein, 2018). Williams was subsequently fined $4,000 for receiving coaching, $3,000 for racket abuse, and $10,000 for verbal abuse (Fendrich, 2018). Following the match, media coverage raised many questions (Abad-Santos, 2018). Was Williams treated differently because she's a woman? Was she treated differently because of her gender and her race?

The Serena Williams Project (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2019), co-created by myself, Keith R. Huff, and Tammie L. Swopes, in collaboration with NYU-TV, examines two moments from the U.S. Open Final when Williams interacted first with the chair umpire Carlos Ramos and then with two other officials for the match, Brian Earley and Donna Kelso. In the first interaction, Williams contests the point penalty due to the coaching violation and racket abuse. In the second interaction, she contests the game penalty for verbal abuse. (ESPN, 2018). A white male actor, a white female actor, and a Black male actor studied the speech and gestural patterns of Serena Williams. Then they performed those patterns verbatim in three separate recorded versions of the exchanges with actors matching the identity characteristics of Ramos, Earley, Kelso, and the sports commentators and doing the same. The project featured Amalia Ritter Adiv, Connor Bond, Akili Brown, Jack Dod, Analisa Gutierrez-Morán, Ian McCabe, Mackie Saylor, and Andy Wagner. A Diversity Innovation Grant from NYU Steinhardt supported the creation of this project.

VPL has used *The Serena Williams Project* as an anti-bias training tool in various settings, from middle and high school classrooms to university classrooms to corporate training venues and professional development workshops. For example, in June 2022, VPL used the project to facilitate an anti-bias workshop for NYU's 65-member athletic department as part of their annual academic year planning retreat.

Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall

In October 2022, VPL premiered *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall* (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2022), a project investigating political polarization in the United States. In his book *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein (2020) attempts to identify a framework for understanding the ongoing challenges of polarization but offers few solutions. While Klein read and analyzed scores of academic studies for his book, VPL sought to identify the causes of political polarization by gathering stories from ordinary people. The idea emerged from an

ongoing VPL interview-based project, *Portraits US* (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2022), which aims to gather the experiences and viewpoints of people living and working throughout the United States during historical events and happenings. VPL uses the word "portrait" to name a verbatim performance of an interview participant. An ethnoactor can perform a portrait as a monologue, or they might perform it in a constructed "conversation" with other portraits in the form of a duet, trio, quartet, etc. (Salvatore, 2018, 2020). Previous *Portraits US* topics for exploration have included Election 2020, COVID-19, cancel culture, and the January 6 uprising. *Portraits US: Polarization* explored the causes of extreme political polarization in the United States, leading up to the 2022 midterm elections. The project also considered how geographic location influences opinion on issues of national importance and the assumptions that audiences might make about where someone comes from based on their opinions.

Using 50 excerpts from over 100 interviews conducted with volunteers from across the United States between October 2021 and August 2022, VPL's associate director Keith R. Huff and I worked with ten ethnoactors to create the verbatim performance that became *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall*. The title comes from a line from a participant's interview. The project performed live at the Pless Hall Black Box Theatre at NYU, October 20-30, 2022,[6] and NYU-TV broadcast four of those performances live as well, allowing the event to reach online audiences in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and seventeen countries beyond the U.S.[7]

The ten ethnoactors used scored transcripts, video recordings of the interviews, and collected field notes to create their verbatim portraits of five different excerpts from five different participants from five different geographical regions in the U.S.: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West (National Geographic). Each ethnoactor received a mixture of participants to investigate and perform. Of the five they were assigned, some matched their identity in some way, while others required them to play across identities. Each performance featured five ensemble members, so the company of ten ethnoactors rotated performances as two smaller ensembles.

Before the performance began, audience members completed a

---

[6] The event's digital program lists the creative and performance teams.

[7] Thanks to Nora Lambert of NYU-TV for these analytics.

poll asking basic demographic questions about their age range, where they currently lived, where they called home, and their political affiliation. We used PollEverywhere, a popular online polling application, as it was easily accessed on smartphones. A host greeted the audience and explained the rules of engagement for the event (Salvatore, 2018), then tapped the audience to randomly select ten portraits, two for each of the five ethnoactors in that particular performance. The ethnoactors then worked backstage to arrange the portraits into four scenes that featured different configurations: a solo, a duet, a trio, and a quartet. Because there were 50 portraits as possibilities, the number of random combinations offered a different performance each time. Between each of the four configurations, the audience completed polling questions using PollEverywhere. The questions asked them to consider where an interview participant might be from, whom they agreed with the most, how often they engaged in a conversation like the one they just experienced, and whom they might want to continue conversing with over a beverage of their choice.

Once the verbatim performance of the portraits was completed, the event shifted to a town hall format. The host engaged the audience in a conversation about what they had experienced and shared the polling results via screens mounted in the theatre. The ethnoactors also joined the town hall conversation to offer insights and reflections about the process and their observations from that particular performance. In addition, the town halls provided space for audiences and the ethnoactors to share their responses to the unique combination of the ten portraits from that performance and to discuss their experiences with portraying across identities and hearing and seeing those portrayals.

In the final moment of the town hall, the host invited the audience to complete one last polling question that asked them to consider three words or phrases that they would carry with them out of their experience of the event. The audience's real-time responses populated a word cloud projected onto the screens in the theatre and the broadcast, leaving them with a final image of potential learning and an answer to one of the questions driving the project: What can we do about political polarization over the next five years? Words like *listen, listening, empathy, patience, understand, understanding,* and *compassion* appeared the largest in each word cloud, indicating that

the audience shared those words the most in their responses.[8] In anecdotal conversations following the production run, the ten ethnoactors also identified *listening* as the most productive action they could take to disrupt political polarization, alongside recognizing that all people are trying to live and see change and that we all should offer up more grace and empathy when dealing with people whom we might disagree with.[9]

The Future

Whatever You Are, Be a Good One represents a culmination of five years of experimenting with verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool that impacts the ethnoactors who engage in the technique and the audiences who engage with the performances. For both groups, verbatim performance helps to disrupt biases through close analysis and critical engagement. As VPL enters its next five years, three current projects offer new spaces for continued exploration to refine verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool.

First, an interview-based project called *That's Not Supposed to be Happening* seeks to shed light on the issue of housing in New York City through the process of locating it, securing it, paying for it, and the obstacles of dealing with landlords, leasing companies, and governmental agencies. The event's structure features verbatim portraits arranged in solos, duets, and trios, similar to the structure of *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One*. However, in between each of those scene constructions, the actors engage the audience in game show-style activations that relay facts, figures, and policies about the New York City housing market. The project premiered in April 2023 and marked VPL's first collaboration with NYU Tisch Drama's Festival of Voices.

A second project called *We're Not There Yet* uses media artifacts and published transcripts from the second hearing of Judge Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination in the wake of accusations of sexual harassment by Professor Anita Hill in October 1991. With the

---

[8] Thanks to Martina Novakova and Yuqing Zhao for their analysis of these audience responses and word clouds.

[9] Thanks to Averil Carr for identifying these recurring themes through informal conversations with the ensemble members of *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One*.

recent 50th anniversary of the passing of Title IX and the continued conversation around the implementation of its policies relating to sexual violence on college and university campuses, the project asks participants to revisit excerpts of these hearings over 30 years later and reflect on how we build more equitable processes that protect the rights and privacy of the alleged parties in situations that arise from an accusation of sexual harassment. To stimulate that reflection, the project uses small-group discussions grounded by curated groups of prompts that invite audiences to choose a prompt and then use it to interrogate the term "believing" and what it means to say, "I believe you." VPL piloted this project in April 2023, intending to remount a more fully realized version in Fall 2023.

We also approach the culmination of a three-year project with Elisabeth King, Professor of International Education and Politics at NYU Steinhardt. The project uses gender and race-flipped versions of a moment from the 2020 Vice Presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence to explore whether verbatim performance as an arts-based intervention can disrupt partisan bias. This collaboration[10] marks the first attempt at using a randomized controlled trial to measure and analyze the impacts of verbatim performance on audiences. An extension of this collaboration seeks to explore the effects of verbatim performance on the development of empathy in ethnoactors and to identify whether verbatim performance could be used as a tool for conflict resolution in crisis zones.

In each of these projects, we have worked to be more intentional about gathering audience responses, whether through comment cards and graffiti walls at the end of a performance, pre-performance surveys via a QR code, or more formalized Qualtrics surveys. Regardless of the method, this data collection helps measure verbatim performance's impact and establish its efficacy as a research tool.

CONCLUSION

As we continue to press forward through times of discrimination, divisiveness, and distrust, verbatim performance offers artists, researchers, and audiences a tool by which we can gain greater clarity

---

[10] The research team includes Sorana Acris, Amanda Blewitt, Laura Cabochan, Arja Dayal, Keith R. Huff, Elisabeth King, and Joe Salvatore.

around the content of what is being said by increasing our understanding of how a message is being shared. The coding of speech and gesture, the performance of those discovered patterns, and the shifting of identity characteristics in those doing the performing combine to reveal what we frequently fail to hear and see. Through continued experimentation with the technique and a sharpened focus on generating data about an audience's experience with verbatim performance, VPL will work to expand its understanding of this arts-based methodological tool and its ability to catalyze greater political, cultural, and societal cooperation and understanding.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

SUGGESTED CITATION

REFERENCES

Abad-Santos, A. (2018, September 10). Serena Williams's US Open fight with umpire Carlos Ramos, explained. *Vox*.

American Playhouse (Producer), & Wolfe, G. C. (Director). (1993). *Fires in the mirror*.

Barnett, D. (2015). *Brecht in practice: Theatre, theory and performance*. Bloomsbury.

Burch, D. (2019). The ethno-actor: Encompassing the intricacies and challenges of character creation in ethnotheatre. *ArtsPraxis*, *5* (1), pp. 24-37.

C-SPAN. (2018, September 27). *Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh sexual assault hearing, Judge Kavanaugh testimony* [Video]. C-SPAN.

C-SPAN. (2018, September 27). *Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh sexual assault hearing, Professor Blasey Ford testimony* [Video]. C-SPAN.

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Verbatim. In *Dictionary.Cambridge.org dictionary*. Retrieved March 1, 2023.

ESPN. (2018, September 8). *2018 US Open highlights: Serena Williams' dispute overshadows Naomi Osaka's final win* [Video]. YouTube.

Fendrich, H. (2018, September 9). Serena Williams fined $17K for rules violations at US Open. *AP News.*

Guadalupe, M., & Salvatore, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Her opponent*. Unpublished script.

Gupta, A. H. (2020, October 6). Likability, authenticity, smiles: The debate tightrope for Kamala Harris. *The New York Times.*

Hammond, W., & Steward, D. (Eds.). (2008). *verbatim verbatim: Contemporary documentary theatre*. Oberon Books.

Her Opponent. (2018, May 28). *Her opponent--full archival version, January 28, 2017* [Video]. YouTube.

Jamieson, A. (2017, January 29). If Trump were a woman: play swaps presidential candidates' genders. *The Guardian*.

Klein, E. (2020). *Why we're polarized*. Avid Reader Press.

Kurtzleben, D. (2020, October 3). How gender shapes presidential debates - even when between 2 men. *NPR*.

Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

Mumford, M. (2018). *Bertolt Brecht*. New York, NY: Routledge.

National Geographic. (n.d.). *United States Regions*. National Geographic - Education.

Saldaña, J. (2011). *Ethnotheatre: Research from page to stage*. Left Coast Press.

Salvatore, J. (2018). Ethnodrama and ethnotheatre. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 267-287). Guilford Press.

Salvatore, J. (2020). Scripting the ethnodrama. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Oxford handbook qualitative research* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1045-1083). Oxford University Press.

Small, M. L. (2019, April 6). *Rhetoric and social science in a polarized society* [Lecture]. American Educational Research Association Spencer Lecture, Toronto.

Smith, A. D. (1993). *Fires in the mirror*. Anchor Books.

Soloski, A. (2017, January 30). He said, she said: Gender-bending the

presidential debates. *The New York Times.*

Stolberg, S. G., & Fandos, N. (2018, September 27). Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford duel with tears and fury. *The New York Times.*

Sumerskill, C. (2021). *Creating verbatim theatre from oral histories.* Routledge.

Vachon, W., & Salvatore, J. (2022). Wading the quagmire: Aesthetics and ethics in verbatim theatre: Act 1. *Qualitative Inquiry.*

Verbatim Performance Lab (2022). *Portraits US.*

Verbatim Performance Lab (2019, January 14). *The Kavanaugh files.* Verbatim Performance Lab.

Verbatim Performance Lab (2019, May 5). *The Serena Williams project: That's all I have to say.* Verbatim Performance Lab.

Verbatim Performance Lab (2022). *Whatever you are, be a good one.* Verbatim Performance Lab.

Waldstein, D. (2018, September 9). Serena Williams vs. Naomi Osaka: How the U.S. Open descended into chaos. *The New York Times.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joe Salvatore is a Clinical Professor of Educational Theatre and director of the Verbatim Performance Lab at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, where he teaches courses in ethnodrama, verbatim performance, and community-engaged theatre. His writings on ethnodrama and ethnotheatre appear in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research (2nd edition)*, *The Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, and *Qualitative Inquiry* (with Wolfgang Vachon). In addition, Joe is a cluster member of the University of British Columbia's Research-based Theatre Collaborative, a collaborating faculty member with Arts & Health @ NYU, and an advisory board member for Artists' Literacies Institute.

Collective Outsider Theatre Practice: Creating an Intercultural Hybrid Form of Practice-Based Conversation

SCOTT WELSH

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE and VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE

ELNAZ SHESHGELANI

MARY-ROSE MCLAREN

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a ten-year exploration of the self and social experience which fused together two disparate theatrical forms, Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, to create an intercultural hybrid performance medium. It harmonised and humanised two artists' practices, and liberated them. This study outlines both art forms and the collaborative work of Scott Welsh and Elnaz Sheshgelani (2009-2023). It describes their process of creating a cultural and performative hybrid form which opens up new ways of thinking about text, movement and performance. As an example of this

hybrid form, the authors draw upon an upcoming performance at La Mama (a Melbourne theatre) about the experiences of a stray pet cat, who spent two years on the street. Titled 'Moosh the Hobo Cat', the piece uses practices established through this collaborative artistic work. The authors then apply this form to their work as Higher Education teachers, and consider the pedagogical spaces that it opens up for students and teachers in university classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore hybridity in theatre as the practice of bringing together contrasting and complementary performative traditions from different parts of the world (Liu, 2013). Such hybridity, which also includes diverse social classes, race and abilities, and backgrounds, elicits discussion and reflection from those involved in the making and from those who are audience. Ultimately, the authors of this paper hope that this form of hybrid theatre might also provoke social change and create 'new futures', ones that transform the past and present (Spiers, 2014). This is an ideal that broadens theatre practice beyond traditional representation using actor, script and audience to communicate a story, into the space of an evolved 'conversation of forms.' Ideas are elicited, and evolve, through the changing and transformative nature of the practice itself. As performance, and as a pedagogical tool, the hybrid theatrical experience alters according to the influence of two distinct cultural practices embedded into the form the drama or performance takes. In the context of this interaction between form and understanding, the authors explore the potential for Persian Storytelling and Real-Life Fiction to offer new opportunities for education. We ask how this theatre of cultural hybridity might be applied in a meaningful way in tertiary learning contexts.

WHAT IS PERSIAN DRAMATIC STORYTELLING THEATRE?

Persian Dramatic Storytelling is an ancient art form from Persia, utilising Persian drama and fundamental elements of Theatre. An important component of Persian Dramatic storytelling is the body representing narrative, story, and words. That means the body must

become literate in the language of story-telling. Poetical archetypes and symbolic communication form the language of the body in dance, facial expressions and gestures. It is, therefore, a language of movement, comparable to Laban, with both emotive and political implications. Sheshgelani describes Persian Dramatic Storytelling as the development of a physical and visual vocabulary, characterised as 'dance-cription' (Sheshgelani & Naghshbandi, 2022), which culminates in the expression of an underlying social/political message (Sheshgelani, 2022). This process of development is triggered by shared experiences of the human condition, archetypes heard in the words, and understanding story through senses. In its ancient form, the functions of Persian Dramatic Storytelling is for the artist to travel and engage with communities, by telling their stories, using their native language/behavioural action in parts of the performer's narrative, and utilising their dance in the performative actions. Persian Dramatic storytelling has survived until recent times, although its original Persian art form has been damaged by Islamic states and beliefs.

WHAT IS REAL FICTION?

Real Fiction is a term used by Welsh (2016) to describe his evolving autoethnographic writing and theatre-making practice. It has similarities to Verbatim theatre, in that it employs the spoken words of real people, and therefore may be considered ethnographic, rather than autoethnographic. However, it also seeks to be explorative and emphasises documenting the experiences of the knowing creative self, through the direct voice of the observed social subject, and though not necessarily advocating on their behalf, this latter engagement may occur through creative practice (Welsh, 2016). It is concerned with characters and relationships, and it does not attempt to replicate the vocal qualities of the initial speaker—rather it lifts the speaker's words off the page and locates them into dramatic contexts. It is a nuanced performative response to conversations that occur in, and as a result of, experiential encounters. Welsh claims Real Fiction 'involves observing and recording voices from the author's experience of others.' An example of this in action is Welsh's rolling and evolving exploration of social experience through 'real fiction' stage representations, such as *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* which explores homelessness and social inequity, and Barcode, which explores

domestic violence and family trauma. Welsh also uses Real Fiction as a pedagogical tool working with Higher Education students. He suggests that, '(Real Fiction) can work in the lives of students to understand and express their social situation' (Welsh, 2017, p. 56).

THE COVERSATION OF FORMS

Sheshgelani has explored and developed contemporary applications of Persian Dramatic storytelling in art-making, theatre-creation, education, and academic research, over the past 15 years. Through collaboration with Welsh a new theatre form has emerged. Many of these theatrical efforts have been unproduced and remain as studio works. Others have been presented as theatrical projects, such as *Tehran* (2013), *The Outcaste Weakly Poet* (Welsh, 2014) and the upcoming *Moosh the Hobo Cat*, at La Mama Theatre (Welsh and Sheshgelani, 2023). Welsh and Sheshgelani have tried and retried the bodily, symbolic, exaggerated physical language of Persian Dramatic Storytelling with present-day written text (usually poetry), portraying the urban experiences of 'outsider' voices. Thus, the ancient art form and its principles are applied to contemporary voices in present-day Australia. Such hybrid art forms work with making and remaking, revising, making, and remaking until eventually the result is understood bodily, emotionally and intellectually by makers of the form, performers, and audiences. In this conversation between Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, the body, and its physical location and restriction, becomes a medium for speaking images.

The application of the hybrid form is best understood, not through the monologues and dialogues contained within the script, but through the stage directions, where the dialogical engagement between the collaborators takes place. The directions are aspirational, a request, responded to by the application of the very particular style, with ancient origins, and are founded on previous engagements. What the movement in the work represents, therefore, is an intercultural conversation between Real Fiction and its representations of 21st century Australia, and Persian Dramatic Storytelling, and its centuries of heritage. Apparent here is connection and emotion driving the work, eros rather than logos, and yet the ideas with which Welsh and Sheshgelani are engaging in the development of this hybrid form are founded in current sociological and pedagogical discourse on issues

such as homelessness in Australia, and literacy through solidarity (Freire, 1972).

An example of a previous collaboration: extract from the outcaste weakly poet stage show

This description of a previous hybrid work, *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show*, helps to explain the interaction of the two forms of theatre, in the creation of something new. This piece based on Welsh's life and observations as a street poet, handing out his poetry in various urban and regional locations in Victoria and NSW, Australia. In 2014, the piece was performed in a small 'tour' that followed the path of Welsh's life as a street poet, beginning at La Mama Theatre in Carlton, heading to NSW and various locations in Sydney's inner-west, so that collaborators on the piece, including Sheshgelani, became embedded in the social and cultural surroundings of the work's genesis. This extract describes the final moments of a man who resided on society's fringe for his entire lifetime. The stage directions are italicized.

They put him on
The floor of
The public hospital
He was a casualty,
In war
On the underclass,
That's all.

Elnaz stands on stage as this is read, begins to look unsteady on her feet, as a deliberate action that expresses the situation, creating a narrative with her body that reflects the words I am reading. This responds directly to the words and, in this particular instance, the style of the movement and the style of the performance work together as a language.

Rolled around,
On the ground,
For once
He wants to be
Free to go to the toilet see.

> *Elnaz follows the words, lies on her back and spins around, her left hand reaching in the struggle to get free.*

In this short extract, it is possible to see the ways in which the two forms are feeding off each other. The interaction between words, rhythm, form and ideas are found in the text and in the movement—and each is enriched by the other. It is this communication during the collaborative process that creates the hybrid form.

Moosh the Hobo Cat (2023)

The engagement between the two forms that is evident in *The Outcaste Weakly Poet Stage Show* becomes a deep entanglement in Sheshgelani and Welsh's most recent collaboration, *Moosh the Hobo Cat* (2023). It is with Persian Dramatic Story-telling in Welsh's process that he writes his stage directions for *Moosh*, drawing on a knowledge established in previous collaborations. The epistemological dialogue contains within it a politics of the oppressed and a fear articulated in the movement. However, it is movement that belongs to a physical language that Welsh does not speak. His words constitute a half-finished conversation that requires the other to be complete.

> Welsh writes: *Music plays. Moosh enters. He comes to centre-stage, eating food. Runs one way and looks. Runs the other and looks. Panics, eats. Hyperventilating, panicked. Hears a noise, runs from his food.*

Sheshgelani's process of planning and engineering the mechanics of the body in the performance, enhancing and responding to the words, so that the collaboration generates yet another artistic form in its process, is represented in the images in Figure 1:
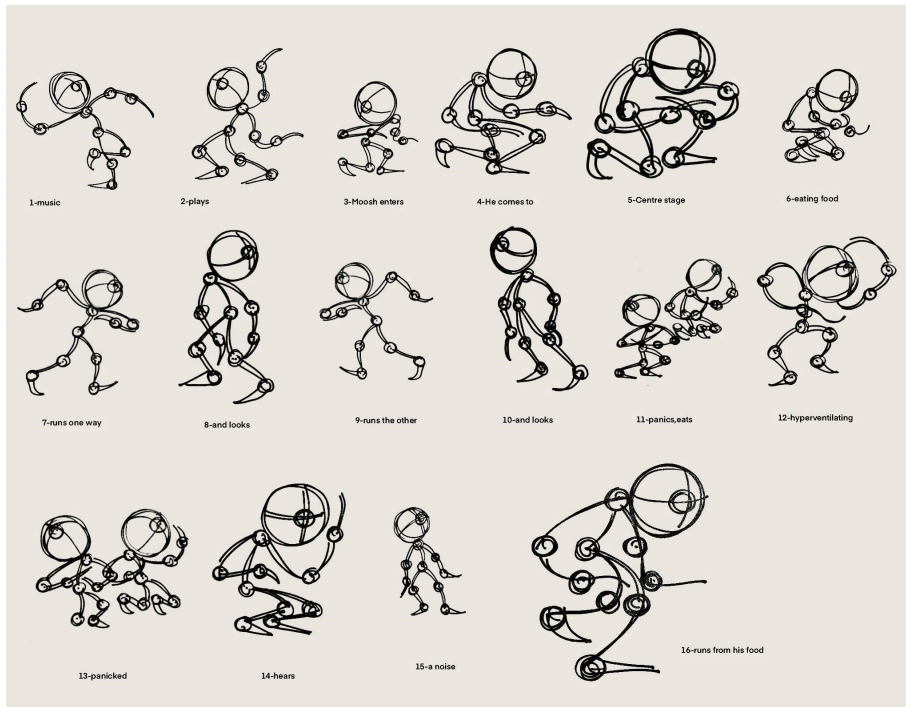
Figure 1: Sheshgelani's process of planning

The visual language represented here was developed by Sheshgelani, and is termed 'Adamaktion'. Adamak means 'little human' in Farci, and the idea of the little human as an existential being is applied in these detailed illustrations of the mechanics of movement, themselves a form of narrative that takes place in a visual communication between the creator of a piece and its performer/s. These designs represent an instructional utterance to be comprehended and then expressed in the actions of the body.

This entanglement of forms can be conceived as applied visual art used in the construction of a conversation, consisting of a physical response (Sheshgelani) to the written/verbal text (Welsh). Political and social narratives told by Welsh are represented in Sheshgelani's process here using concepts from her practice. Themes of homelessness, *helplessness*, despair and defiance permeate the illustrations, but all are depicted with an innocence reflecting the developing character of Moosh the cat.

A closer look at Moosh: Representing childhood trauma

The following scene from *Moosh* further elucidates the creation of the hybrid form.

> *(The lighting becomes ominous here. Gone [a cat] emerges from the small group of cats, this part is reminiscent of the musical 'Cats'. Music is kind of Tom Waitsish or Dylan's 'Signor…'-whatever the actual title of that is.)*

Gone had been born a hobo and salvaged from the masses in the pit of hopelessness. He'd lived on the hard streets of Sydney, cannibalising the left-over cat meat, laced with cocaine and disguised as chicken, thrown out by the illegal brothel owners, who only had the food as a front for their depravity. Eventually, the people smuggler who owned the joint got busted and took it out on Gone, kicked him and left him half-dead, with damaged organs.

> (*Let's make some sculpturesque items for the above part*)

Moosh and Gone became great mates.

> *(miming together)*

They hunted together. *(a stance for this)* They fought other cats together. *(A nasty launch at the audience) And Gone taught Moosh how to live or survive (miming little learning moment, like carving a rat with one's claw).*

> *(Then it stops and Gone moves into the shadows and falls on the ground-leaving Moosh alone in a spotlight) One day, Moosh noticed Gone didn't want to play anymore. (lights on Gone) He didn't want to hunt, and he didn't even want to come out from the room where he slept.*

It turned out Gone was very sick, and eventually Gone died. This made Moosh very sad.

Considering this form of hybrid dramatic story telling as a forum for the exploration of ideas, we see here an indirect exploration of childhood

trauma. The cat, 'Gone', is traumatised by the documented abuse. His death brings with it a meaninglessness, a kind of nihilism that is the beginning of Moosh's fall from grace and his own trauma, which is the impetus for a journey of self-discovery. Like all heroes, Moosh loses his mentor and must forge his own identity. He ultimately emerges at peace but hardened and changed, having grown through his quest to survive. The fact that the experience is one of homelessness, contextualised in the hybrid form of Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction, means that the performance provides a forum for exploring both the ideas contained in the social experience and forms of representation of these ideas and experiences.

THE INTERCULTURAL THEATRE AS A PEDAGOGICAL SPACE

The type of theatrical experience, rich in deep affect, that takes place in the practice described above creates a 'conversational reality' (Welsh, 2014), in the form of stage directions, words, movements and cultural echoes. It is a construction of solidarity in action; it is a doing of empathy. In this sense, it is pedagogical on a personal level and, in terms of Freire, it is politicised by unifying the voices of the oppressed in the conversation of stage directions. By engaging in this intercultural practice, we are utilising the languages of words, stage directions, and movement to participate in a conversation.

As a progression of this work, we suggest that this hybrid art form provides a constructive framework for combining two separate cultural foundations for educational purposes. The education that takes place between performers is perhaps comparable to the 'informal pedagogy' that is claimed to occur in youth and community work or psychotherapy (Jeffs & Smith, 2021). It is when the self comes to a realisation through engagement with a youth worker or therapist, for example, and is an internal education, an education of the self, a somewhat private language that occurs in the throes of performance for the purposes of representation. We are claiming here that the realisation contained in a statement like, 'My childhood was like this' or 'I thought that experience meant x when it actually means y,' arrived at through the conversational process of therapy or care, is perhaps similar to the realisations of a performer arrived at through direction and collaboration. This thinking has a relationship with Freire's conscientization and liberation (2018). When we perform, we are

freeing ideas from their containment in a single consciousness, expanding our understanding and practices into a shared consciousness. The sharing of ideas through the language of performance is an act of solidarity, firstly established between performer and performer, and then performer and audience. When this liberatory act contains within it an intercultural language that is not expressed in words, but carried between cultural utterances in actions, then the body and its actions and, in this case, Persian Dramatic Story Telling movement, translate language and cultural experiences into the process of the broad story-telling contained in the whole performance. For example, Moosh's story is represented in the body of the Persian Dramatic Story Teller, so that it becomes a discourse on the experience being represented. But can the pedagogical impact of this hybrid form of theatre reach further than actors and audience?

In developing this hybrid theatrical form, Welsh and Sheshgelani have constructed a coherent language that is a form in itself, a habitus that ultimately makes the communication occurring between performer/s and audience an indirect language. For the audience it is almost the ideal of a 'private language'. That is, the language act of the script is consumed by the body of the performer, in this case the poet and Persian story-teller. In this language act, we can conceive of the theatre itself as a site for 'public pedagogy' (Charman & Dixon, 2021). By considering the theatre as an educational context, the notion of intercultural exchange through a hybrid practice becomes a unique form of pedagogy.

The authors of this paper are also teachers in Higher Education at Victoria University, Melbourne, whose stated values are 'Welcoming, Ethical, Shaping the Future (progressive) and Together'. In our teaching, we use theatre-making to introduce Education students to Higher Education, critical thinking and concepts of personal and professional identity. Through the use of Boal's games for actors and non-actors, we open up conversations about power and introduce students to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018). We encourage students to represent their educational journeys through the use of drama (McLaren, Welsh, & Long, 2021). As pedagogues, and performance artists, our focus is on developing analytical skills through the experiences of doing and being, and creating opportunities for students to build networks of belonging, intellectually and emotionally. We are keen to bring affect into our work and encourage the

engagement of the whole person in the learning process (McLaren & Welsh, 2021). We also explore the *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (Freire, 2014) through the practice of drama as it is applied in our course and unit, and through student reflections on their experiences within educational systems. Students explore their learning journeys through drama practice, and then combine these in a collective performance. They are introduced to a range of theatrical and educational concepts, and develop skills through drama games. They are supported to share and express their stories, and to find common and distinctive elements in the stories. Through the use of metaphor, and a range of storytelling techniques, they create an ethno-drama, which they perform before their teachers and peers. The process created and described by Welsh and Sheshgelani in this paper can be particularly impactful for these Higher Education students. Whilst both Welsh and Sheshgelani have utilised their own practice in classrooms at Victoria University, this final ideal of 'togetherness' implies a collectivism and solidarity that is crucial to Freire's notion of collectivism as a means for liberatory literacy (2018). The proposed intercultural practice is a powerful educative tool because it blurs the line between educator and educated, teacher and learner. It draws on a social hybridity which occurs when the students combine and perform their stories in the unit (McLaren & Welsh, 2020), and offers them different ways of engaging physically, emotionally, and linguistically with the stories they are telling. It offers a way of connecting students to their heritage, their personal stories, and each other. It invites students to think and feel deeply about identity, purpose and aesthetics. It is also liberating— although both Persian Dramatic Storytelling and Real Fiction have 'rules', the hybrid form of these opens up new spaces for students to explore. It offers them a way of telling their stories that is beyond the norms of theatre as they have experienced them.

We claim that the collective and distinctively intercultural conversation between two 'outsider' experiences that occurs in this hybrid creative process has potential for enhancing both pedagogical and ontological knowledge. When this knowledge is taken into Higher Education classrooms, it invites deep responses from students, connecting their personal stories with wider social and cultural experiences. It honours the complexity of heritage reflected in our student cohort, the power of recognising and physically representing intersectionality, and offers new ways for students to express knowing

and belonging.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intercultural fusion of two distinct methods of performance practice that, when combined, create a hybrid form. It has documented the collaboration that has constructed this hybrid practice, its application in performance and its potential in pedagogical contexts. This paper also makes the long-standing claim that theatre practice can perform a significant social function, through questioning and expressing particular beliefs, so that the theatre makers, performers and audience can become agents of social change. In this paper, we have shown how this might occur in the stage directions of a hybrid piece of theatre, where social and intercultural engagements are imagined and reside. In this way, drama in all its forms, becomes a forum for exploring ideas through the action of performance, the medium of the script and the creative space that exists between script and performance.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Welsh, S., Sheshgelani, E., and McLaren, M-R. (2023). Collective outsider theatre practice: Creating an intercultural hybrid form of practice-based conversation. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. 21-34.

REFERENCES

Boal, A. (2021). *Games for actors and non-actors*. Routledge.

Brook, P. (1996). *The empty space: A book about the theatre: Deadly, holy, rough, immediate*. Vol. 11. Simon and Schuster.

Charman, K., & Dixon, M. (2021). *Theory and methods for public pedagogy research*. Routledge.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Freire, P., Freire, A. M. A., & De Oliveira, W. F. (2014). *Pedagogy of solidarity* (Vol. 4). Left Coast Press.

Jeffs, T., & Smith, M. K. (2021). The education of informal

Theatre (Melbourne, Australia) and at international festivals in Armenia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Elnaz is a member of UNESCO's International Dance Council (CID). She teaches Creativity and the Arts in Education at Victoria University, and is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies (2022).

Mary-Rose McLaren is a professor of Education and Social Knowledge at Victoria University, Melbourne. She is also a theatre maker, and works at the intersection of theatre practice, theory and learning. With Scott Welsh, she has brought theatre practice into teaching in Higher Education as a way of creating belonging, breaking down barriers, and developing critical thinking about experiences. Her most current research focusses on values, affect and ethics in learning environments.

Advocating for a Neurodiverse Audience

CHRISTINE V. SKORUPA

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

In 2021, I was an actor in a sensory immersive piece at LIU Post titled Branching Out. It was devised with a neurodiverse audience in mind ("neurodiverse" being used as a term for those with neurological differences that are oftentimes put at a deficit because of society's unfair emphasis on ability). However, this was the first time I ever encountered sensory-friendly theatre, and began questioning the lack of audience inclusivity on Broadway. Upon further research, I learned that in 2022, Broadway's Theatre Development Fund (TDF, 2022) provided only 3 "autism-friendly" Broadway shows. In response to this, I interviewed 3 women who are spearheading accessibility initiatives on Broadway (Courtney J. Boddie, Jennifer DiBella, and Lisa Carling) to discover what can feasibly be done to diversify theatre spaces. I am proposing a Universal Design for Theatregoing: one that is representative, inclusive, accessible, and ever-changing with research and new technology. This design is inspired by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework (CAST, 2018) that is commonly used in

Educational Theatre to ensure that every individual learner receives a meaningful and enriching educational experience. Akin to UDL, the Universal Design for Theatregoing adjusts the audience environment so that audiences may enjoy their theatre experience regardless of ability and without judgement.

> *"Systems do not maintain themselves; even our lack of intervention is an act of maintenance. Every structure in every society is upheld by the active and passive assistance of other human beings."*
>
> *— Sonya Renee Taylor, The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*

INTRODUCTION

On August 4, 2021, I received a casting notice from the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts at Long Island University for a project entitled *Branching Out*. The production description read as follows:

> Casting actors for the Tilles Center original TYA production *Branching Out. Branching Out* is an original work of sensory immersion theatre created for audiences on the autism spectrum and those who have limited movement, sensory, and/or complex communication needs. Actors should have a basic understanding of the characteristics of autism and a desire to help children learn and thrive through the arts. This sensory immersion production is a hands-on interactive experience which will take place for small audiences in January, 2022. (Tilles Center, 2023)

The casting call was looking for a young actor to play the role of Natura, Mother Nature's daughter. At the time, I had never heard of "sensory immersion theatre" before, nor did I have extensive experience working with audiences on the autism spectrum. I did, however, have experience learning about students with autism in an undergraduate Mental Health in Education course, so I was intrigued

as to how this kind of theatre experience would work. The director, Stephanie Turner, was looking specifically for a teaching artist who was comfortable with playing music, improvising with an audience, and most importantly had "extra compassion." I figured if I could do any of those three things, it would be to exude extra compassion. I auditioned, interviewed with the creative team, and found out a week later I had gotten the part.

Our cast was composed of all women. One woman on the team was a teaching artist who primarily worked with neurodiverse populations, one woman on the team had autism spectrum disorder, one woman on the team was well-researched on theatre for young audiences with neurodiversities, and the rest of us were there with our open minds, ready to learn. We began with a quote from a book called *The Reason I Jump* by Naoki Higashida (2016), an autobiographical book written by a 13-year-old boy with nonverbal autism. The director told us that this quote inspired her vision for the piece, which would be a nature-based journey through the seasons.

> Nature calms me down when I'm furious, and laughs with me when I'm happy. You might think that it's not possible that nature could be a friend, not really. But human beings are part of the animal kingdom too, and perhaps us people with autism still have some left-over awareness of this, buried somewhere deep down. I'll always cherish that part of me that thinks of nature as a friend. (Higashida, 2016)

We discussed the ways in which listening to and participating in a theatrical piece such as ours could look any number of ways. Therefore, we would work as an ensemble to create as many ways as possible to engage our audience. In hindsight, I now see that we were using the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to make our content as accessible as possible for all learners (CAST, 2018). With UDL, the environment that learners are in changes to suit their needs, rather than each individual learner having to stretch to fit the environment around them. UDL places an emphasis on engagement, representation, and action & expression, and the UDL Framework outlines how educational spaces can allow for equitable access to content.

1. Affective Networks: The "WHY" of learning—provides multiple means of engagement—interest, effort and persistence, and self-regulation.
2. Recognition Networks: The "WHAT" of learning—provides multiple means of representation—perception, language and symbols, and comprehension.
3. Strategic Networks: The "HOW" of learning—provides multiple means of action and expression—physical action, expression and communication, and executive function. (Cast, 2018)

You can access a visual representation of these neural networks in this UDL infographic from CAST. The networks are defined as the "how", "why", and "what" of learning, respectively.

Our show was a fully interactive one. Audience members (mostly comprised of school groups) were provided with a social story in video and paper forms before the show so that they would understand where they were going and what they would see. For example, one category on this sheet (and video) contained characters. My character's name would be clearly written, and adjacent with it would be a clear image of me in costume. In the video, each character is introduced with verbal narration. They were also given video and sound footage of the songs so that they could sing along with us. The show incorporated elements of American Sign Language (ASL), musical instruments, and simple follow-along dance moves that were also demonstrated prior to the show. We provided a wide variety of seating: room to stand and roam when desired, comfortable chairs both with arms and without, soft carpeted floors, and spacious wheelchair accessibility. Our audience members (neurodiverse and neurotypical alike) could help us design our sets, change the seasons, experience the senses in each season through smell, touch, sound, and even be part of the script. During the show, audience members had an agenda with what the show would consist of, multiple "quiet rooms" that they could go to if they ever felt overstimulated, and buckets of fidget toys at their disposal. "Nature guides" were played by Long Island University actors who would help students on an individual basis if they needed assistance getting to a quiet room, toy, or prop. They also encouraged participation to the extent at which each student felt comfortable. Most importantly, our show was a "no-shushing" show. Students were able to vocalize, self-

soothe, "stim,[1]" wander, speak, sing, and move with the actors.

All of these activities followed the Universal Design for Learning almost precisely, which seems to be a theme in theatre-making for all audiences. Students who participated in the show had their affective networks of the brain stimulated through multiple modes of engagement and interest, including sensory props involving the seasons (e.g. ice packs for cold winter snow, roses with floral scents to represent the smells of spring, and crunchy fall leaves to touch and throw). Their recognition networks were activated by displaying information about the seasons in a variety of ways: pre-show resources detailing what was to happen at the show, a visual agenda always present during the performance, and verbal repetition of what was to come next and review of what has happened already. Finally, the strategic networks of the brain were activated through allowing the audience members to express their feelings about what they were learning in multiple modalities: through dance, song, verbally answering questions during or after the show, or even simple head nods or body cues.

After the show, cast members were able to speak one-on-one with the teachers and students who came and participated. Many students were overjoyed to be a part of the show and help Natura along her journey through the seasons. They cited that they "finally were able to dance!," loved the songs, were a big help to the stage, and many had a particular season they rooted for throughout the show. Teachers spoke to us about finally being able to go on an engaging field trip with these students, as oftentimes these students had to stretch to fit the traditional field trip environment by enforcing quietness and stillness. This time, a show was specifically made for them, and it meant a lot to have leadership opportunities, a safe space, and a fun and enriching show to stimulate both play and learning. There was also a special comfort found in the way that the show provided opportunities for self-advocacy. Students participated in any way pleasurable to them without pressure or judgement, and could opt-out at any time.

It seemed so simple during the show to make it universally accessible to audiences of all kinds. Soft lighting simply took lowering a light cue, gentle instrumental music was easy to adjust to, fidget toys

---

[1] Stimming includes "self-stimulating behaviors, usually involving repetitive movements or sounds," as defined by Healthline.

can be purchased in bulk at 50 pieces for less than $20, a social story took 30 minutes of the Assistant Stage Manager's time to make, and "quiet rooms" were rooms adjacent to the theatre that incorporated couches and chairs that weren't being used elsewhere. All in all, the cost and time of adjusting a small-scale show to make it more accessible would hypothetically be less than $50 and an hour of time. I decided to find a Broadway budget and compare how much monetary damage this would cause. I came across a budget for the musical *Kinky Boots* on Broadway in 2013 to use as a general example. According to Hal Luftig (Fierberg & Fitzpatrick, 2017), a lead producer on *Kinky Boots*, their Broadway show had a budget of around $13.5 million. He cites that "Theatre Expenses" (e.g. front of house, box office, ushers, custodians, etc.) make up 18% of this budget. 18% of a $13.5 million budget comes out to $2,340,000. To pay a videographer or social media developer for regularly-updated social stories to be provided both physically and online, a surplus of fidget toys and their upkeep (bonus points for ones that are aesthetically related to the show), additional time for sound and lighting designers to provide alternate light cues, and additional rehearsals and regular accessibility-related professional development for actors, production teams, and staff, it could hypothetically cost less than 1% of the "Theatre Expenses" budget ($23,400). If that doesn't sound like enough, Luftig cited that 17.9% of the show's budget goes to "Additional Expenses" (e.g. press appearances, day-to-day expenses, parties, etc.). That's $2,416,500, even more than "Theatre Expenses." If price isn't a determining factor, then why do Broadway shows remain inaccessible to all audiences?

DEFINING "NEURODIVERSITY"

In order to further delve into the issue of ableism seen in Broadway shows, we must first explore the definition and use of the term "neurodiversity." Neurodiversity was first coined by sociologist Judy Singer in the 1980s. She used it with two purposes: to be "an addition to the categories of intersectionality thus an analytical lens for examining social issues such as inequity and discrimination," and "an umbrella term as a possible name for a civil rights movement for the neurological minorities beginning to coalesce around the pioneering work of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Movement," (Singer, n.d.). Singer

now advocates for the use of "neurodiverse" as a political term with a focus on social justice rather than a scientific term to diagnose an individual. Modern neurodiversity research and education has built upon this idea, using it as an aid to diagnose neurological conditions. In the instance of "neurodiverse" versus "neurotypical," "neurodiverse" is recently defined by Baumer & Frueh at Harvard Medical School as "the diversity of all people, but it is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities," (2021).

For purposes of this essay, I will be using Baumer & Frueh's definition of neurodiversity, highlighting those with neurological differences that are oftentimes put at a deficit because of society's unfair emphasis on ability. I would also like to acknowledge that I am by no means an expert on neurological psychology or education with students with neurodiversities. My experience with education with these populations primarily lies in college-level coursework, relationships with friends and their family members with neurodiversities, and my personal involvement with *Branching Out*. But I aim to use my privilege as a theatre artist and student at NYU Steinhardt to endeavor to change the way society views a theatre-going audience.

BROADWAY & ABLEISM

Upon further reflection of *Branching Out* being the first time I've ever encountered sensory-friendly theatre, I began questioning the lack of representation for neurodiverse audiences in big Broadway houses, let alone my own theatre productions that I've worked on. I wondered if I was falsely imagining the purpose of Broadway, or theatre at all. I curiously Googled the question, "What is the purpose of theatre?" and the first answer to pop up was from the website of Acting Studio Chicago. It listed the first answer as: "Theatre helps us to see a different perspective from our own." The second answer was: "Theatre reminds us that we are not alone." Then why are so many left out of it? Not only with casting, but also with audiences? Many discussions about populations with neurodiversities have been held before, oftentimes deeming society as the population who creates the barriers to which these populations must overcome. Broadway shows and their

advertisements are perpetuating these barriers by flaunting "acceptance," "family fun for everyone," and "today's America," while leaving an entire community out of it. For example, an advertisement for the musical *Dear Evan Hansen* shows a boy with cast on his arm. *Dear Evan Hansen* is emblazoned across his shirt and "a new musical for the outsider in us all" is written on the cast (Polk & Co., n.d.). In another example, an advertisement for the musical *Waitress* shows a man and woman rolling dough together over text that reads, "*Waitress*, the romantic musical comedy." Above them, in all caps, the advertisement reads, "EVERYONE DESERVES A NICE SLICE OF HAPPINESS" (TodayTix.com, 2023). And in a final example (as seen in Figure 1), this advertisement for the musical *Come from Away* proclaims, "THIS IS THE SHOW WE ALL NEED RIGHT NOW."

Figure 1: Advertisement for London's *Come from Away* (used with permission of Lauren Fee, Junkyard Dog Productions)

I remembered hearing about The Theatre Development Fund (TDF, 2022) and its autism-friendly performances, and checked to see if they were still happening. I found out that in all of 2022, TDF only provided 3 performances of Broadway shows for neurodiverse audiences. Not only are there only 3 performances, but there is also only one performance of each of three different shows, and they all occur on a Sunday at 1pm. If a parent or caregiver is unavailable on Sundays at 1pm, they are out of luck until perhaps next year—if the show they are interested in is funded enough by TDF's donors to hold another sensory-friendly show. To provide some more statistics on how unfair the ratio of sensory-friendly performances to the

neurodiverse population is, 1 in 44 children has been identified with ASD according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023). Also according to the CDC, about 1 in 6 (17%) children aged 3–17 years were diagnosed with a developmental disability from 2009-2017. This is a significant population of people to be barred from being a theatre-going audience. To quote Mickey Rowe, one of the first actors with autism to play a character with autism in theatre:

> If all things were equally accessible, you would expect to see one autistic in sixty-eight employees of any company in the US. Because small talk is so important in current interviews and auditions, this doesn't happen. But it would happen if things were more accessible. And we can help to make it what we see in the future by acknowledging and realizing that not everyone's brain is wired the same way; by acknowledging neurodiversity exists. (2015)

Not only do Broadway shows exclude neurodiverse audiences, but they also bar audiences with physical handicaps. Broadway theatres are required by law to provide accommodations for audiences with mobility impairments, but it is still cited that audiences with physical handicaps "will often find it is something of an ordeal to actually get seated" (New York Show Tickets Inc., 2022). Most Broadway theatres have no elevators, so "handicap seats" are typically restricted to the orchestra in the rear or extreme sides of the theatre. Some Broadway theatres even lack bathroom access to wheelchair users, causing them to have to leave the theatre to track down one outside of it. Blogger Karin Willison, an avid theatregoer who uses a power wheelchair, writes a blog consisting of tips to seeing a Broadway show as a wheelchair user. One tip she highlights is "Expect to find basic disability access, not full ADA compliance," (Willison, n.d.). She mentions that one will most likely encounter "steep ramps, tight corners, and oddly sloped floors," making it a treacherous endeavor just to be seated. These statistics show that Broadway theatres, even modern-day ones, expect audiences to be able-bodied and neurotypical.

 Explicit here is the idea that society puts up these barriers that cause disability: the individuals themselves should not be at a disability by simply wanting to see a show. Oftentimes, society at a greater

whole is unable to provide equitable accommodations for all people. This is a different way of defining "disability," which many refer to as the "social model of disability." Instead of the disability being something that is a problem to be fixed, it is only a disability because society has created a disabling environment that does not allow the individual to participate in the world. Again, to reference UDL, the theatre environment should be the one stretching—not the audience members themselves.

I spoke with Courtney J. Boddie, the Director of Education & School Engagement at the New Victory Theatre in New York City, about her professional experience with inclusivity in the theatre community, the Broadway community, and beyond. I asked her why she thought Broadway theatres were not as inclusive as they could be all the time, to which she answered: "Ableism, capitalism, …as a society, we're just so rooted in ableism." When asked if there's a future for Broadway where inclusive performances are the norm, she shared that she wants to believe that it can get better, not only with accessibility, but with the way actors are treated as well. We discussed briefly the parallels between sensory-friendly performances and "blackout performances" (performances that are specifically for Black audiences). It seemed that instead of creating a more inclusive environment, it actually worked against the producers' intentions.

> …I get it, but that's what I'm saying, like, it's the same with sensory-friendly performances, right? We're saying, "This performance is the only performance that you can go to," as opposed to saying, "We are creating a space where many people in the audience would like these supports." But how do we think about what that means for all of the performances? I can't make that particular performance, what is my experience going to be on a different date? How are you thinking about that? (C. J. Boddie, personal communication, March 25, 2022)

This comment caused me to think about how we can change the mentality of theatregoing as a whole. How can we create a community that is inclusive, rather than exclusive?

But this does not go to say that there are no theatre companies in the New York City Broadway community leading the initiative to include people of all abilities. I also had the pleasure of speaking with Jennifer

DiBella, the Director of Education at Roundabout Theatre Company, about the non-profit's role in the disability community. Jennifer shares that, "Roundabout is a better organization, and a richer organization, when we are inclusive and accessible to all." Roundabout has been broadening their horizons to further include theatregoers who are neurodiverse beyond just holding one or two family-friendly relaxed performances a year. They provide relaxed performances for each show they produce, so that the stigma around "othering" adults with disabilities is erased. Jennifer even expressed that a relaxed performance should be a constant:

> A relaxed performance should just be the norm…I would love that every performance is a relaxed performance. That we create an environment that's part of the fabric and the culture of theatregoing that is about: Doesn't matter who you are. How you experience the art is the way that you're experiencing art, that's the right way to experience it. There's no "right" way. You know, there's no "wrong" way or "right" way to experience art. (J. DiBella, personal communication, March 24, 2022)

Not only has Roundabout been seeking a more inclusive environment for their audience population, but they have also been making an active effort to highlight and produce work made by actors, playwrights, and directors who are neurodiverse through their recent Reverb Festival which they hope to revive annually. In this festival, work is made accessible: ASL interpretation, captioning, and audio description are present, descriptive image captioning is explicitly displayed on the front of the program, and disability activist partnerships are promoted (such as EPIC Players, Arts for All Abilities Consortium, and DreamStreet Theatre Company). But their work does not stop here. Jennifer expressed that though Roundabout has been making strides within the disability community, there is still a way to go with universally designing their theatregoing experience so that it is "for them, all the time" instead of just one performance at a time. She also shared that moving forward, there needs to be an emphasis placed on hiring more staff from the disability community. Jennifer hopes that Roundabout can learn from what they have successfully accomplished—but just because they've completed one initiative does not mean that they will stop. They continue to ask the question, "Who's missing?" in order to

build as inclusive and representative of an environment as possible.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR THEATREGOING

I would like to propose a "Universal Design for Theatregoing" in order to rethink the theatre space as a whole, to advocate for the neurodiverse audience, and to obliterate the stigma against audience members with disabilities. To include a disclaimer, I am not the first person to ever propose such an idea. Dramaturgs and theatre artists such as Andrea Kovich (2021) and Lynne B. Silverstein (2020) have proposed similar methods to further include all theatregoers in theatrical spaces. But large-scale change has still not come, so I aim to continue this conversation and push it to the forefront, especially with our new generation of theatre artists and producers. I have spoken to many folks now about small steps theatre companies are taking to further include all populations. But I don't think theatre can be completely accessible without an entire overhaul of theatre spaces. Sure, one theatre company can hold a relaxed performance each season—but unless they build an elevator and designate more diverse room for accessible seating, is it really that inclusive of a space?

My lead motive for this radical design was inspired by Jennifer DiBella's question: "Who's missing?" There are many folks missing from the theatre community. A litany of all these people could take up an entire dissertation. As both Jennifer DiBella and Courtney J. Boddie both expressed: sensory-friendly or relaxed performances should be the norm in theatre spaces instead of one-off performances. Originally, when beginning to write this paper, I thought I would come up with lists of "Short-Term Goals" and "Long Term Solutions" for theatre practitioners, teaching artists, directors, producers, and architects to use when designing a show and keeping its audience in mind. But after exploring this issue in depth, it has come to light that a truly inclusive theatre space would take effort from all production parties alike. The only way to truly break open the theatre community would be a complete revamp.

What would this reimagining of a theatre space look like, under Universal Design for Theatregoing? I created a graphic based upon the principles of Universal Design for Learning to more clearly articulate this vision, as seen in Figure 2.

Universal Design for Theatregoing (1/2)

Engagement	Representation
Provide options for **Recruiting Interest** through representation of the diverse disability community in production & creative teams, thus creating a representative and intersectional space for all Provide options for **Self-Regulation** by challenging the mentality of being quiet and still during a show by explicitly allowing for a range of vocal, physical, and/or emotional responses without worry of patron judgement, providing space for all audience members to go to with a variety of sensory resources, relaxed performance options, hiring audience support staff to be present at each show to best support audience & production team needs	Provide options for **Perception** through providing access to differentiated auditory and visual information at every show Provide options for **Language & Symbols** through providing the audience with accessible social stories in multiple languages and media (e.g. text, video, sound, images) Provide options for **Comprehension** through pre-show educational workshops and post-show talkbacks, extensive visual show information in advertisements & in the theater, & holding touch tours of props and set pieces pre-show

Figure 2: Universal Design for Theatregoing, based upon the UDL Networks

I would like to emphasize that though this information was consolidated into a graphic organizer, these are not the only ways that Broadway shows can provide engagement, representation, and action & expression. If anything, these are big ideas that need to be implemented in each Broadway production very specifically and intentionally.

I spoke with Lisa Carling, the Director of Accessibility Programs at the TDF, to learn more about how TDF has been providing accessibility for its audience, and what's holding Broadway shows back

Universal Design for Theatregoing (2/2)

Action & Expression	Goals
Provide options for **Physical Action** through providing differentiated seating (e.g. every seat in the theatre being either removable or adjustable to accommodate audiences of all mobilities), accessible bathrooms on each level, smooth ramps, elevators & assistive technologies in every theater, including rehearsal spaces & backstage, opening theatre spaces early and closing them late to allow audiences to skip lines & move at their own pace	Theatre spaces that are…
	Representative and Inclusive of folks of all abilities across all ages
	Accessible for all before the show, during the show, and after the show
Provide options for **Executive Functions** by earnestly surveying theatregoers to see what production teams could do better & more inclusively	**Constantly changing** and **modernizing** with research and surveys of what would best serve audiences

from establishing an accessible environment for every show. She shared that in order to hold a relaxed performance, organizations such as TDF must first buy out the entire theatre, a feat that they must "budget to lose money on" (Carling). Carling shared that money for TDF's autism-friendly performances mostly come from foundations and individual donors. TDF then must pick and choose what shows this will happen for and when based on finances and audience interest (audiences are surveyed after each performance to find out what they would like to see next). Thus, many shows chosen are family-friendly, something that perhaps not every single adult theatregoer would choose.

Before COVID, TDF was able to hold 6 autism-friendly shows each season. I asked Lisa Carling if she thought a Broadway community where sensory-friendly performances and general public performances could be combined as the norm would be possible in the

future, to which she shared:

> We stand by a very protected environment, a "no apology zone," as one parent with tears in his eyes said. We wanna make sure it's a supportive, judgement-free, loving environment. So, can ticket sales ever be open to the general public? I don't think we're there yet as a society. We don't wanna put our families in a situation where they're made to feel defensive or embarrassed or uncomfortable about explaining why their child or adult is stimming, or singing, or talking back to the actors, or getting up. I mean—hey just need to relax and be themselves, which is important to us. (Carling, personal communication, March 25, 2022)

A running theme throughout the interviews I've held has been that society-at-large is what is causing this problem (the social model of disability). This is not a new concept: society has historically been built for able-bodied and neurotypical folks, ostracizing others. The idea of holding more sensory-friendly and relaxed performances under the Universal Design for Theatregoing is how I aim to normalize this kind of theatre, and destigmatize certain audience members from being "othered." Under "Engagement," I also challenge the idea that patrons must remain quiet and still throughout a performance, whether it be a relaxed performance or not. If audience members who do have a bias that each patron should remain still and quiet during a performance are able to challenge the societal idea that there is a "correct" way to behave in a theatre, perhaps it could have a ripple effect on society as a whole.

What can we do to fund changing society's idea of theatregoing? If we are to use this Universal Design for Theatregoing, one that relies on accessibility (especially physically), where does the money come from? On TDF's website, a list of top-ranking donors is published. At the top $100,000 and above level are: New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, National Endowment for the Arts, The New York City Council Committee on Mental Health, Disabilities, and Addictions, The New York City Council Committee on Veterans, and The Taft Foundation. According to Robert E. Wankel (President and co-CEO of the Shubert Organization), the cost to build a new Broadway theatre in 2017 was over $150 million. Perhaps a complete overhaul of every

single Broadway theatre at once is unfeasible—but there are shifts that Broadway shows can make that are absolutely doable and necessary. Taking the steps of providing safe spaces during shows, hiring more folks from the disability community (especially in positions of leadership), installing more modes of visual and auditory accessibility, and taking all audiences into account are ground-breaking steps that could yield drastic change in the mentality of Broadway producers and theatregoers alike. The goal is to completely remove these barriers from the disability community, so that every theatre lover can have a meaningful experience in their own way.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Skorupa, C. V. (2023). Advocating for a neurodiverse audience. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. 35-51.

REFERENCES

Acting Studio Chicago. (n.d.) 5 Reasons Why Theatre is Still Important. Acting Studio Chicago.

Baumer, N., & Frueh, J. (2021, November 23). What is neurodiversity?. Harvard Health.

CAST (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2 [graphic organizer]. Wakefield, MA.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, April 4). Statistics on autism spectrum disorder. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Fierberg, R. & Fitzpatrick, F. (2017, September 25). How much does it cost to put on a Broadway show? *Playbill.*

Higashida, N. (2016). *The reason I jump: The inner voice of a thirteen-year-old boy with autism* (K. Yoshida & D. Mitchell, Trans.). Random House.

Kovich, A. (2021, March 29). Envisioning change. *HowlRound Theatre Commons.*

New York Show Tickets Inc. (2022). Access for disabled patrons at Broadway shows. NYTIX.

Pietrangelo, A. (2021, October 22). Stimming: Causes and

Management. *Healthline.*

Polk & Co. (n. d.). *Dear Evan Hanson.*

Rowe, M. (2015, May 2). Our differences are our strengths.
    HowlRound Theatre Commons.

Silverstein, Lynne B. (14 January 2020). Arts Integration and Universal
    Design for Learning. The Kennedy Center.

Singer, Judy. (n.d.) Neurodiversity: Definition and Discussion. *Creative
    Commons.*

Staff, Broadway. com. (2017, September 12). The Shubert
    Organization cancels plans to build new Broadway theatre: "It got
    too complicated." *Broadway.com.*

TDF. (2022). TDF Autism Friendly Performances. TDF.

The Broadway League. (2019). Research Reports. The Broadway
    League.

Tilles Center. (2023). Branching Out. Tilles Center for the Performing
    Arts LIU Post.

TodayTix. (2023). Musicals: *Waitress*, London.

Willison, Karin. (n.d) 8 Tips for Seeing a Broadway Show as a
    Wheelchair User. *Free Wheelin'.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christine V. Skorupa (she/her) is completing her Master's in Educational Theatre (Dual Certification in Theatre & English) at NYU Steinhardt. She received her BA in Theatre (Acting/Directing) with a minor in Education from Binghamton University. At Binghamton, she received a Research Scholarship through the Summer Scholars and Artists program which she used to study at the Stella Actor Studio to gain a broader understanding of theatre education as a whole. Over the past few years, she has been teaching theatre to students from grades Pre-K through 8th grade while also performing. On stage, she was recently seen as Natura in *Branching Out* at LIU Post, a new sensory immersive theatre production. Currently, she is playing Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with NYU's Shakespeare to Go company.

Encounters with Otherness in the Work of Dorothy Heathcote

DAVID ALLEN

MIDLAND ACTORS THEATRE, UK

AGATA HANDLEY

UNIVERSITY OF ŁÓDŹ

ABSTRACT

Dorothy Heathcote observed that three things dominate in using drama in the classroom: the concept of "frame"; the deliberate infusion of "the other"; and "conventions" to keep the "human face" at the centre (n.d. a). Her praxis may, indeed, be seen as a form of encounter with alterity, or the "face" of the "Other".

Levinas has been described as the "philosopher of the Other". He defined ethics in terms of the relationship to alterity: he posited a "face-to-face" encounter with otherness, which leads to a shift from the "for-itself" to the "for the other" (2006, p. 174). He made it clear that what he called the "face" of the Other is not the literal (physical) face, but rather, the responsibility we feel for the other person.

In recent years, there has been a significant turn to Levinas

among educational theorists. Gert Biesta suggests that Levinas "opens up a dialogical space where pedagogy becomes—or can remain—an event rather than being a pre-programmed process"; creating opportunities for students to respond, not as "the modern rational cogito, but as the Levinasian responsible and 'response-able' subject" (2003, p. 67).

This article—based largely on unpublished materials from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive—focuses on a drama which she led in Alberta, Canada, in 1982, which may be seen as creating a space for "response-ability", through a series of "focussed encounters with 'otherness'" (Heathcote, 2010, p. 19). The participants had asked to do a drama about a plane crash; the article outlines the steps which led them, not only to recognise the horror of the event, but to bear witness and take responsibility for the plight of the "Other."

In a note written c.2002, Dorothy Heathcote observed that three things "*dominate in using dramatic elements*" in the classroom:

1. Concept of changing *frame*, the window thro' which we decide to view.
2. The deliberate infusion of "*the other*"
3. *Conventions* to keep the human face i.e. feeling / thinking balance (n.d. a; emphasis in original)

The reference here to the "human face" may be seen in Levinasian terms, as an encounter with the "face" of the "Other."

Levinas has been described as the "philosopher of the Other" (Hutchens 2004, p. 14). He defined ethics in terms of the relationship to alterity. He posited a "face-to-face" encounter with otherness, which disrupts the individual ego: there is a shift from the "for-itself" to the "for the other" (Levinas, 2006, p. 174). He made it clear that what he called the "face" of the Other is not the literal (physical) face, but rather, the responsibility we feel for the other person. As Hutchens observes, the Other commands the self to "exercise its powers completely on behalf of the other. It calls the self's freedom into question and then demands that it use it responsibly" (2004, p. 21).

In recent years, there has been a significant turn to Levinas

among educators and educational theorists.[1] In part, this may be seen as a response to the neoliberal model of education, with its emphasis on efficiency, performativity and accountability, designed for "the production of potential workers with a portfolio of accessible and measurable skills" (Strhan, 2012, p. 14). It has also been seen, more broadly, as a reaction against the Western epistemological tradition, that reifies the development of the "rational autonomous being" as the central goal of education (Strhan, 2012, p. 14).[2] Joldersma describes this model as "coming to know this or that. Or, perhaps more accurately, coming to know this *as* that; to know is to correlate *this* (thing) in terms of *that* (idea)." Learning in this model "means having an adequate grasp on something, comprehending it, inserting it with a concept. ... By ever widening the ego's circle, the conscious subject encompasses exteriority to reveal the known world (Joldersma, 2008, pp. 43-44). In other words, this is a process of cognitive mastery, in which "the subject is conceived as a *cogito*, as a being whose first relationship with the world (including other human beings) is a *knowledge* relationship, and where it is only on the basis of this knowledge that the subject comes to act" (Biesta, 2003, p. 62; emphasis in original). Levinas, however, challenged the idea of the subject "as a substantial center of meaning, as a *cogito* who is first of all concerned with itself, and only then, perhaps, if it decides to do so, with the other" (Biesta, 2003, p. 62).

As Gouping Zhao argues, Levinas gives teachers the tools to rethink education, so that it might become "about encountering the new and strange, about being interrupted and called into responsibility to the Other" (2018, pp. 2-3). This demands a shift from the focus on mastery and control, to openness to alterity and the unknown; from "learning about" things, to "learning from" the Other (Todd, 2003, 8-10). This relationship "is neither a knowledge relationship nor a willful act of an ego" (Biesta, 2003, p. 63). Roger Simon recognises that it is not possible to simply "broker" Levinas's work into "the programmatic regularities of a pedagogical methodology" (2003, pp. 45-6). Nevertheless, Biesta suggests that Levinas "opens up a dialogical space where pedagogy becomes—or can remain—an event rather

---

[1] See, for example, Todd (2003), Egéa-Kuehne (2008), Strhan (2012), Joldersma (2014), Zhao (2018).

[2] See, for example, Strhan (2012), Joldersma (2008), Biesta (2003), among others.

than being a pre-programmed process". Education, in this view, is not about passing on knowledge or truths, but about creating opportunities for students to respond, "*not* as the modern rational *cogito*, but as the Levinasian responsible and 'response-able' subject" (2003, p. 67; emphasis in original).

In Heathcote's praxis, drama may be seen as an event, an embodied encounter with otherness. In her 1992 article "Stewardship: A paradigm for education?", she called for an education system based in "stewardship", as an alternative to the "mechanistic world paradigm" (1992a, p. 12). Her definition of the term may be seen as synonymous with responsibility and "response-ability"[3]: among its elements, she included the capacity to de-centre from self; the responsibility willingly undertaken; and a dedication "to service by self and not to self-service" (1992a, pp. 22-3). She stated:

> For me stewardship is acknowledging that everything else around you is not you, you acknowledge the other but not yourself. Everything that is not you, has to be attended to. Stewardship is actually engaging with what there is around you and attending to it. (As cited in Matusiak-Varley, 2016, p. 239)

This is, indeed. a paradigm shift, from "learning about"—collecting and storing "stocks" of knowledge—to "learning from" everything that is "not you".[4]

This article—based largely on unpublished materials from the Dorothy Heathcote Archive—focuses on a drama which she led in Alberta, Canada, in 1982, which may be seen as a series of "focussed encounters with 'otherness'" (Heathcote, 2010, p. 19).

DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY

In the note on "drama elements" quoted above, Heathcote refers first to the concept of "frame", the "window through which we decide to view" an event (n.d. a).[5] She claimed that "frame" gives children "the power to operate" in a drama, but also, "the responsibility for their

---

[3] Defined by Kelly Oliver as "response to address" (2001, p. 5).

[4] As far as we are aware, Heathcote did not know Levinas's work

[5] Heathcote took the concept of "frame" from Erving Goffman (1986).

behaviours in operating, and that's of course why they think more deeply" (n.d. b). She defined nine types of frame, each with a different relationship to the event, from being a participant in it, through "guide", "agent", "authority", "recorder", "the press / storyteller", "researcher", "critic", and "artist" (Heathcote, 1991a). Frame should be distinguished from "role"; as we will see, the children might be in *role* as "shepherds," but within that role, they might be variously *positioned* in the frame of "guides" or "recorders" (etc.), in relation to the event.

On several occasions, she used the "Good Samaritan" story to explain the concept of frame. In the story, a man who is travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked and beaten by robbers on the road, and left for dead. Heathcote suggested that children might take the role of shepherds who witness the event from their position on the hillside above the road. In this way, they would become "guides" to it, who have to report on what they saw to others. In the scenario which Heathcote developed, however, they would also become implicated in the situation: they would realise "that their hut had been used by the thieves. And they have seen it [the assault], and know they have been seen seeing it" (Heathcote, 1991c).[6]

Heathcote's frames may seem to imply moving away from emotional involvement in an event. She made it clear, however, that she always chose the frame(s) which would "get the children closer to the event", even though "in the beginning, when you look at 'frame,' people think I'm taking children away from the event" (Heathcote, 1991b). She described the Good Samaritan story as "a horrendous tale. It is so evil"; her aim, in the drama, was to "get the full horror of what it must have been like" (Heathcote, 1991b). She argued that the "participant" frame, "where the children act the story", would actually take them "furthest away" from the event, because they "will never get into it that way" (Heathcote, 1991b). It would be beyond their ability to act it convincingly, and/or too remote from their own experience for them to realise the "full horror of what it must have been like".[7]

---

[6] Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Dorothy Heathcote are from this source.

[7] In his Ph.D. thesis, John Carroll observed that the frame of participant requires "a high level of acting skill", and work from the teacher over an extended period to develop "a deep level of feeling response to the context", and to sustain belief. Other frame distances "do not require this same level of acting skill to be effective. They require an attitudinal commitment to the role from the pupils" (1986, pp. 123-5). Heathcote herself argued: "By removing from them the need to be skilful, in the

In the role of shepherds, the children were trapped, in effect, into a prolonged engagement with the problem. As Heathcote observed:

You are actually wanting people to consider the nature of taking enormous risks, getting rid of prejudice, and helping a seeming enemy—and possibly being deeply endangered because of it. That's what the Good Samaritan might be about. So it doesn't matter which frame you chose, it's chosen to get nearer to it, not further away. (1991b)

As shepherds, the children's situation in some degree parallels the Good Samaritan's own: they face enormous risks, to help someone who is a stranger to them. They have to choose between protecting themselves, and taking responsibility for the Other, and testifying for him. This dilemma may be seen (in Levinasian terms) as a choice between the "for-itself", and the "ethical self", based in "a priority of the for-the-other" (Levinas, 2006, p. 182).

The role of shepherds establishes a community with a limited viewpoint, a settled sphere of responsibility and reference (i.e., looking after sheep). Into this world, there is an irruption of the Other, which disturbs them in their isolation. Their position (on the hillside above the road) is, literally, separate and distanced from the event; yet, they are summoned to respond. They may choose to remain bystanders, in the comfort of their own "jouissance" of the world (to use a Levinasian term) (Levinas, 1969, pp. 12-13). Indeed, there is pressure on them to turn away, to protect themselves; and yet, as witnesses, they are ineluctably implicated in the event. This community can never be the same again: even if they ignore the call to respond, they will have to live with the knowledge of their choice, their denial of the suffering of the Other.

We may see the participants' position in terms of what James Hatley calls the "suffering witness". This is a witness to violence and suffering, who feels responsible, even though they could not do anything to change the situation. Hatley writes:

Burdened by the other's suffering, we are called upon not only to

---

expressive mode, you leave them free to penetrate extremely deeply" (as cited in Eriksson, 2009, p. 160).

understand or, at the very least, to give a historical record of a particular act of violence, but also and in the first instance to witness it. By witness is meant a mode of responding to the other's plight that exceeds an epistemological determination and becomes an ethical involvement. … [O]ne is summoned to attentiveness, which is to say, to a heartfelt concern for and acknowledgement of the gravity of violence directed towards particular others. In this attentiveness, the wounding of the other is registered in the first place not as an objective fact but as a subjective blow, a persecution, a trauma. The witness refuses to forget the weight of this blow, or the depth of the wound it inflicts. (Hatley, 2000, pp. 2-3)

The participants in the Good Samaritan drama may be led to a recognition of the "horror" of the event, not only in its effect on the victim, but as a "subjective blow" to themselves. In Levinas's terms, "subjectivity is sensibility—an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others"; and this "wound" that begins in sensibility, "calls upon an irrevocable responsibility" (Levinas, 1991, p. 77). There is a move, then, from distance to closeness, or what Levinas terms "proximity" (1991, p. 5): a closeness that is not based in spatial contiguity, but in openness or exposure to, and priority for, the Other.

"FACING THE GORGON"

The same paradoxical move from distance to proximity may be observed in a drama that Heathcote led in 1982 in Canada. This was part of a teacher training event; in her introductory remarks to the teachers, she said that one of her "obsessions" was "to establish 'the other'"—partly to focus the children's attention, so they did not feel "stared at", but also, she said, to get them "to pay attention to something other than self" (as cited in Craig, 1986, p. 28).

The group that she was working with asked for a "plane crash" drama. She recalled: "Now I said to myself, no way can they 'pretend' an air crash. It will just be pretending. I shall spend all my time trying to help them express agony; what I want them to understand is—understand it" (as cited in Hesten, 1994, p. 228). It was clear to Heathcote that the group had images in their heads of "crashing

through the jungle … and we're all going to be dead, and play doctors". They would "play" at the drama, in other words; and there would be an element of "jouissance" here, in the simulated experience of danger and adventure. Rather, as we will see, there was an emphasis in the drama on imagining the event, on "witnessing" over direct involvement; but this, again, was intended to move them closer, ultimately, to a recognition of the "full horror of what it must have been like" (Heathcote, 1991b).

There is a wider issue here, in terms of the difficulty of bearing witness, in drama, to the reality of extreme or traumatic events. In *The drowned and the saved* (2017), Primo Levi's reflections on life and death in the Nazi death camps, the author states that only "those who saw the Gorgon", i.e., who witnessed the horror and were permanently silenced by it, can be seen as the "complete witnesses": they have met the monster's deadly gaze that turns people to stone, and they "have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute" (Levi, 2017, p. 70). In other words: only the "complete" witness can truly know the terror of the limit-experience. In *The birth of tragedy* (1872), however, Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the Greek theatre created a form to enable the spectator to look into the abyss of human suffering—"to gaze into the horror of individual existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision" (1956, p. 102). In other words: faced with extreme events, art can play the role of Perseus' mirror shield (which the hero used, in the myth, to be able to look in the face of the Gorgon).

Heathcote's frames may be seen as a form of artistic "mirror" that, in approaching an event indirectly or at a distance, enables it to be faced, "yet without being turned to stone". Frame distance shifts the drama participant away from being *in* the event, to the position of the "witness". In the Good Samaritan drama (and, as we will see, in the plane crash drama), this is the position of the "suffering witness": one who endures "the impossibility of suffering the other's suffering" (Hatley, 2000, p. 5). At the same time, there is a move towards a recognition of the "horror" that the "complete" witness experienced—i.e., towards seeing what they saw, albeit by means of a protective form.

THE IRRUPTION OF THE EVENT

Through negotiations with the group, Heathcote established that the location of the plane crash would be in a remote area of Northern Canada, and they would be in the role of engineers who were working there, testing electrical equipment in low temperatures, who would, by chance, be the first to "witness" the event, by picking up radio signals on some of the wireless equipment they were testing. A key element of the drama was that, when the crash occurred, it would be part of a "routine day" for the engineers; a sudden irruption in their world, a "call" to respond.[8] Like the shepherds, this was a community with a settled sphere of responsibility and reference. The event would disturb them in their isolation, and they would have to take action: there was no-one else in this remote location who could. (This may be seen in Levinasian terms: he argued that, when the Other commands my attention, I am the only one who can answer: "no one else can be substituted for me" [Llewelyn, 2002, p. 219].)

The group established their "routines" for testing different kinds of equipment, "for strength of materials, correct writing, correct instructions" etc. (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 97). Heathcote herself prepared a tape recording of the final moments on the plane, that the group would overhear. The sounds evoked the crash: it began with ordinary conversations on the plane, with food being served; then, the first signs of concern from the pilots, and "an almighty rushing sound", followed by an eerie silence. The group listened to the recording several times before the drama began. Heathcote observed:

> I always show people the end of something. I never work on, "We don't know what's going to happen." What I work on is: we know *what*, but we don't know *how*. That to me is far more important. If we know what, we stop rushing towards it [i.e, the crisis event] and we stay slower at working out how it shall be.

Knowing what will happen in advance may be seen as a form of "protection *into* emotion, not from emotion" (Bolton, 1984, p. 139; emphasis in original). The participants are "shielded," in effect, from being shocked or perturbed by the sudden event; and yet, as we will

---

[8] "in its mortality, the face before me summons me, calls for me, begs for me" (Levinas, 1989, p. 83).

see, they may still "stumble on authenticity, the authentic response" (Heathcote, 1985). In other words: they may be caught "off guard" in the moment, in the way they respond to the event.[9]

In her article "Signs (and portents?)" (1982), Heathcote created a list of thirty-three drama conventions, which she described as ways of placing the "human face" at the centre of the work (Heathcote, 2007), and creating "focussed encounters with 'otherness'" (Heathcote, 2010, p. 19). They range, for example, from a teacher actually present and working in role, to a "depiction" such as a portrait, through objects or documents to represent a role, and so on. The recording of the plane crash was an example of number 27 in the conventions list: "A conversation overheard" (Heathcote, 1982, p. 26). Arguably, hearing the recording several times in advance helped to prepare the participants to take on the frame of "witness." The horror of what happened was suggested, but not spelled out, in the recording: the gaps were there for the participants to fill with their imaginations, and the silence at the end was powerful in its implication of loss and death. The frame gave the group a paradoxically involved-yet-removed relation to the event: they were not present at it, neither were they confronted directly with the horror of it; at the same time, they became "witnesses" in their imaginations.

The group entrusted Heathcote with the task of finding the right moment in the drama to play the recording. She told them: "I promise you I won't do it until you're really deep in your testing of your washing machines and so on" (i.e., in their routine jobs as engineers, testing equipment). She recalled:

> And we get very, very deeply immersed [in the testing]. So, the second hour, you see, is taken up with deliberately not hearing a black box [recording]. Reports get written. Just a bit, not much. And they keep looking, and I say, "Do you want me to [play the recording]?"
>
> "No, not yet, not yet, not yet."

---

[9] This is how Heathcote defined "off guard": "in the no-penalty zone of the fiction, you can be caught unaware, and take yourself by surprise, that you've thought of something in a way you hadn't quite seen it before. … I think there are all sorts of breakthroughs that can happen" (1992b).

> Because it's only when, by their will, they are deeply involved, that the black box [recording] will happen.

It seems, then, that the group wanted to delay the moment of hearing the recording, to sustain the experience of the drama. Their primary focus was on the routine tasks, but there was an underlying tension in every action: "we are alert to anything unusual *because we are so careful in following routine*" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 97; emphasis in original). This is Heathcote's account of the reaction when, finally, she played the tape:

> And when it happens, the girl [as the first "engineer" to hear the recording]—this is what I mean by this stumble on authenticity. The girl simply puts her pen down. [Long pause.]

> "Did you hear anything then?"

> And the kid said, "No."

> "I'm sure I heard something, like an engine."

> Somebody over there says, "I think I heard something. What was it?"

> "I don't know."

> "Try again."

> "Well, I know I've not moved the [radio] station, but I'm not picking anything up. But they said something about a whiteout."

> Everybody's stopped, and they gathered round. They're as near to a plane crash as they'll ever get. At least I hope they'll ever get.

Heathcote observed: "at that point you have got the beginnings of understanding of an air crash. This terrible, terrible shocking silence" (as cited in Hesten, 1994, p. 229). Even though the drama had been pre-planned, there was an "authentic" response, it seems, in the moment. It is paradoxical that this could occur, even though the

participants knew in advance what was going to happen, and had already heard the recording several times. The moment may have been experienced as a "call" to responsibility / response-ability: from this moment, they had the "burden of knowing." As Heathcote observed:

> they're in a terrible dilemma. Only one person can be fairly certain they picked something up. It's a terrible responsibility to try and get Air Canada and ask them if they've got a plane missing. You see what I mean by the quality of work?

Arguably, this was not simply the burden of responsibility to report the crash: the pauses and silences indicate that there was an internalised response, a recognition, if not of the horror of the crash, then the trauma of becoming a "suffering witness".

THE DEATH OF THE OTHER

François Raffoul has observed that, in Levinasian terms, it is the mortality of the Other which ultimately "calls me to responsibility":

> It is as if the death of the other concerned me even before my own death, as if it had priority over my death, as if the death of the other put me into question, as if I would be an accomplice if I did nothing! … Responsibility for the other—non-indifference to the other—is not leaving the other die in his or her death-bound solitude. I am responsible for the death of the other in this first sense. (2010, p. 195)

In the drama, the plane crash was returned to again and again, in different ways. In one episode, the group decided that, as the only people in the vicinity, they should fly over the crash site in a helicopter. (Heathcote recalled a moment in another drama, when a group faced a similar, "terrible responsibility", in the realisation that "nobody's available to go except us" [1988, p. 17].[10]) The group stood around a

---

[10] The drama was set in the time of a military coup. The participants were in role as journalists, who had to decide to leave the country, or try to look for a fellow journalist who had gone missing (Heathcote, 1988).

long roll of paper, and looked down, as if flying over the site of the crash, and scouring the landscape through imaginary binoculars. Heathcote told them to put marks on the paper to represent trees. Then, they added evidence of damage to the trees from the impact of the crash. The outcome was a representation of the landscape which was like a "terrible wound":

> And there is no plane drawn. There's only trees broken. It's terrible to look at, and so right. The talk is of things like, "Somebody's luggage"; "There's a bit of the tail plane there"; and so on.

At times, they stood back to look at the "map" they had created: "And I say, 'You can actually see it, can't you? See how it hit there, and went there, and now there's that—a great gouge through there, and all those broken trees'." At this point, Heathcote observed, the frame had shifted: the participants were now "recorders", compiling detailed evidence of the event; flying over the site

> to record how we think the order of the experience must have been. So you've got somebody saying, "Take me over the tail again. No, it must have come out after the door, because there's a piece of tree there …" (Heathcote, 1991b)[11]

In this way, the *frame* can change, even though the *role* might stay the same.

Like the shepherds on the hill in the Good Samaritan drama, the group were given a distanced, "bird's eye" view. (Heathcote observed that, at this moment in the drama, "the bird's eye view and the distance is what I have to get".) They did not witness the crash itself, but only the terrible aftermath, the fragments or traces of the event. The blank roll of paper perhaps suggested the expanse of barren landscape which the helicopter flew over; the kind of landscape where nothing at first is visible and then, as the eyes adjust, some objects become clear. The remote, snow-covered land itself suggested "death-bound

---

[11] Heathcote suggested that the same task—flying over the crash site—could be done from different frame perspectives, such as "researcher", looking for common patterns by comparing it to similar crashes. A doctor, on the other hand, might act as a "guide" to explain the physical trauma he/she observes in the crash victims; and so on (1991b).

solitude" (Raffoul, 2010, p. 195), the emptiness and silence of death. The signs (of trees etc.) acted as a focal point, to evoke mental images in the participants; as they looked at the marks on the map, they could imagine the "terrible wound" of the crash. The very length of the paper, moreover, may have evoked a dawning awareness of the scale of the tragedy, and of their own responsibility for the event—their own "subjective wound".

The "map" is another example of one of Heathcote's conventions ("Any document or written account other than a letter, which refers to a specific person or event" [Heathcote, 2006[12]]). Together, the signs of the crash—the damaged trees, the plane fragments—evoked the "absent presences" of the crash victims, and the trauma of their deaths. The map itself was a form of shield or mirror, to enable the drama participants to "gaze" indirectly at the event. The primary level of responsibility was as "recorder," making a minute examination of the event, but the secondary level was the responsibility of the "suffering witness". The sequence can be seen as an example of what Edward Bond has called "accident time", when things seem to move slowly, resembling "the stillness at the centre of the whirlwind. … We are suspended in the accident" (2000, p. 48). In accident time, "we see more, and we see more precisely" (Bond, n.d.).

The marks on the paper may be seen in terms of what Levinas termed "trace": "a small presence of something that is absent" (Pöggeler, 1987, p. 70). Trace is always enigmatic and incomplete: it "reminds us of what we have not witnessed and have to approach via conjecture" (Gross & Ostovich, 2016, p. 3). It invites reading, but also imagination, to complete the "gaps." As Dorota Glowacka observes, it "can be understood as that which *makes it possible to imagine* the events that, in their extreme impact on human lives, seem to defy existing representational strategies" (2012, p. 19; emphasis in original). Many of Heathcote's conventions deploy trace, and are in accord with what Glowacka terms a "poethics of disappearing traces" ("Within the poethics of disappearing traces, the other—ungraspable in an image or word—can attest to its existence from behind the figure, as an echo of what has been forgotten" [Glowacka, 2012, p. 165]).

In the next episode in the drama, Heathcote invited the group to

---

[12] This is from a revised version of the conventions list, which Heathcote sent to Eileen Pennington (2006, December 31). Copy preserved in the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

"invent a couple of passengers each, or some aircrew":

> And all the people are invented. You can't have them in the plane, if you haven't invented them. They can't be allowed to crash, if you won't be responsible for the nature of the people they are, because that's logical. And so, we invent.

Heathcote looked for ways that she could make these people "live" in the drama. We may observe a progression, from a more "distanced" view (flying over the landscape in a helicopter), to an increased awareness of the crash victims as individuals. The victims were not real but imagined; and yet, the word "live" implies they became "absent presences" that existed in the imagination of the participants. The fact that the victims were invented maintained an awareness that this was a fiction, and this in itself was a form of protection for the participants. Nevertheless, they progressively moved closer to the victims *in their imaginations.* They had, in a sense, a dual responsibility: to *invent* the "lives" of the victims *within the drama*, and yet also, to honour them as if they had really lived; to invent and name them, and in effect, to respond to their "call," and become responsible to them in their deaths.

To make the victims "live", Heathcote turned again to her conventions. As we have seen, they were designed to evoke "focussed encounters with 'otherness'" (Heathcote, 2010, p. 19). In this case, she decided that the crash victims would "live" by "the last thoughts they have"—an example of convention 17: "An account of a person written as if from that person, but read by someone else" (Heathcote, 1982, p. 25). The group each noted down the passengers' "last thoughts"; for example: "I'll be first out no matter what. Where's the exit? Right. Push. Get out of the way" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 100). The children put these notes on the "map" of the crash, in places where they thought the victims might lie; so the drawing was, as Heathcote saw, becoming rich with different layers, and multiple "traces" of the dead.

Heathcote recognised that, through these tasks, the group were "very closely bonding" with the imagined victims of the crash; "they weren't just treating them as nothings". Moreover, they were moving closer to imagining their experiences in those last moments before the crash—as if seeing through their eyes, as the real ("complete") witnesses of the crash; and so, towards what Levinas called "substitution": the possibility of putting oneself in the place (or in the

shoes) of the Other, or "being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Levinas, 1991, p. 115).[13] In the next episode, the group created envelopes for individual passengers, containing objects which they might have had with them at the time of the crash. One envelope, for example, held a plastic barrette and comb; a half-finished letter ("Dear mother... sorry I've not been writing lately..."); some diary pages listing hospital appointments; a kidney dialysis appointment card; and a bookmark inside a book, with an illustration of praying hands (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 101). The "last thoughts" of each passenger were also added to the envelope. The participants were engaged here as creators of a "poethics of disappearing traces": selecting objects to act as "traces" of the people who had died. Each of them then took an envelope which someone else in the group had created, and tried to interpret the contents. Again, there was a shift in frame (but not in role): at this point, Heathcote suggested, they were functioning as "critics". (She observed: "Don't think of the critic as the person who criticises. … The critic interprets" [1991b]). The task was to interpret these "traces" as evidence of how the passengers may have responded to the impending crash: "what they think the person at that moment may have understood—I don't like the word 'felt'; understood". For example, the boy who studied the envelope containing the donor card (etc.), commented:

"Well, I think she was in deep trouble, because this kidney dialysis card is very new, and I think, you know, she's—she's obviously been making a flight to start this life on dialysis. And this letter to her mother, she can't go home. That's terrible," he said.

I said, "I know."

"And those hands [on the bookmark]. Well, maybe she was religious. Is there any evidence that she was religious?" …

You can't imagine anything so moving, as we're all sitting here, as this "critic" interpreted this lady. (Heathcote, 1991b)

---

[13] There is much more to Levinas's notion of "substitution" than this, but space does not permit us to discuss it in detail.

This is an example of a form of a hermeneutical reading of "trace", to imagine the "absent presence" of the Other. The boy's comments suggest that the task again led to a still closer form of "proximity" or "substitution", of "having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Levinas, 1991, p. 115).

At the start of the drama, Heathcote had promised the group: "If you trust me, I'll give you an air crash." Now, in the final stages, they experienced being in a plane crash, albeit in a controlled (distanced) way. It was agreed that Air Canada had decided to use the evidence gathered from the crash, to "teach aircrew the kinds of human behaviours that can happen in plane crashes". The children created a kind of "simulation" of the crash: they arranged themselves in the seats of a mock-up of the airplane, as if they were "robots" that had been programmed to represent the thoughts and actions of the people in the crash. The passenger's "last thoughts" were placed on their knees. Again, then, the roles were being given life after death "by the last thoughts they have". In the background, there was a continuous sound of the plane's engines, and the "black box" recording was played over and over. Heathcote took on the role of a trainee stewardess, who could "activate the model", and ask them: "How is it? Can you teach me not to panic?"

> That's when they got their plane crash. They got it through the convention of being a robot representing somebody else's life, for the benefit—so they were my "guide" to the crash. Not so that I would just understand, but so that I could appreciate something of what might happen.

The episode, then, took the form of a "briefing", a warning to the trainee stewardess, that "This may happen to you". In this way, the children were in the position of the people in the crash; but they were primarily focused on the responsibility of explaining, for the benefit of the stewardess, and demonstrating behaviour, as part of a training exercise. This did not distance the emotion so much as "protect" them into it. At the same time as they were explaining behaviour, they were also providing testimony about what happened, and seeking to "speak" for the Other. In the role of "robot," they did not *become* the Other; and yet this was closest they came to substituting for them, or being in their shoes. They were not the "complete witnesses", but were trying to

represent them, and convey their thoughts and feelings to someone who had no idea of the real horror. They could never, finally, know what the "complete witnesses" saw; they could only attempt to speak for them. As Glowacka observes: "The witness's task is to recover these traces [of the Other's existence] but also to pry open the strictures of one's own tongue in order to allow the other's voice to be heard through one's speech" (2012, p. 18).

Over the course of the drama, the group's frame position had shifted several times; but in each frame, there was a central tension, in the responsibility to bear witness "to the other's plight", to "remain true to him or her" (Hatley, 2000, p. 3). Heathcote observed that, if she had had more time, the next episode would have been to create a memorial; so the group would work, at the end, in the frame of "artist", again attempting to provide testimony, and "speak" on behalf of the Other.

As we have seen, the different frames created a measure of protection: there was a primary focus on the task (as "recorder", "critic", etc.). At the same time, they demanded a continued attention and "gaze" at (the "traces" of) the event (e.g., flying repeatedly over the "map" of the crash site to record its details, and so on). In this way, the participants could stare into the face of "the Gorgon", as through a mirror; but they could not look away. Working through frames was also a way of de-centring the self, placing them always-already in the position of witnesses, as "a mode of responding to the other's plight that exceeds an epistemological determination and becomes an ethical involvement" (Hatley, 2000, pp. 2-3). At the same time, as we have seen, there was a move towards "substitution". This was not the same as identifying or "merging" with the people in the event, however; but rather, simultaneously being "in-one's-skin" *and* "having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (Levinas, 1991, p. 115). The group could try to understand the experience, and move close to substitution, while always remaining "*themselves in their head*" (Heathcote, n.d. c; emphasis in original).

In the final phases of the drama, the children were realising their own knowledge, by explaining it, or representing it to others. This was not knowledge in the form of cognitive mastery, or "learning about"; rather, the group were "witnesses" who were passing on their learning to an other, or to future others as yet unknown. In Levinasian terms, this was learning "through the other and for the other" (Levinas, 1991, p. 114); and this always-already carries an ethical involvement.

Heathcote's praxis may be described, then, as a form of "coming into presence"—in the sense of an encounter with the (absent) presence or "face" of the Other, and a recognition that everything around you "is not you", and "has to be attended to" (Heathcote as cited in Matusiak-Varley, 2016, p. 239).[14]

SUGGESTED CITATION

Allen, D., and Handley, A. (2023). Encounters with otherness in the work of Dorothy Heathcote. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. 52-74.

REFERENCES

Becker, A. (2019). (Re)framing the subject(s) of rights. In C. Roux & A. Becker (Eds.), *Human rights: Future directions* (pp. 31-52). Springer.

Biesta, G (2003). Learning from Levinas: A response. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *22*, pp. 61–68.

Bolton, G.M. (1984). *Drama as education: An argument for placing drama at the centre of the curriculum*. Longman.

Bond, E. (2000). *The hidden plot: Notes on theatre and the state.* Methuen.

Bond, E. (n.d.), *Density: Notes on drama and the logic of imagination*. Unpublished manuscript.

Carroll, J. (1986). *Taking the initiative: The role of drama in pupil/teacher talk* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Newcastle.

Craig, T. (1986). Towards an understanding of the drama work of Dorothy Heathcote at Fairview, Alberta. In J. Blakey, L. Nosbush (Eds.), *Creativity: Pathway to the future* (pp. 27-52). Alberta Teachers' Association.

Egéa-Kuehne, D. (Ed.) (2008). *Levinas and education: At the intersection of faith and reason*. Routledge.

---

[14] The phrase "coming into presence" was used by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, to refer to "the coming into presence of a unique singular *who* in the presence of the community" (Becker, 2019, p. 45; emphasis in original). It is hopefully clear that we are using the phrase in a different (Levinasian) sense.

Eriksson, S. A. (1990). *Distancing at close range: Investigating the significance of distancing in drama education*. Àbo.

Glowacka, D. (2012). *Disappearing traces: Holocaust testimonials, ethics, and aesthetics.* University of Washington Press.

Goffman, E. (1986). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (B. Berger, Trans.). Northeastern University Press.

Gross S. & Ostovich S. (2016). Introduction. In S. Gross & S. Ostovich [Eds.], *Time and trace: Multidisciplinary investigations of temporality* (pp. 1-7). Brill.

Hatley, J. (2000). *Suffering witness: The quandary of responsibility after the irreparable*. State University of New York Press.

Heathcote, D. (n.d. a). "Elements of teaching" chart, produced as part of the Hexham Hospital Garden Commission project at Queen Elizabeth High School, 2001-2. Unpublished manuscript. Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (n.d. b). "Dorothy's responses to teachers' comments: 7. You never seem to cast the children into different parts." Unpublished manuscript. Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (n.d. c). "What is involved in drama work?" Unpublished manuscript. Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (1982). Signs (and portents?). *SYCPT Journal*, 9, pp. 18-28.

Heathcote, D. (1985). Recording of training session at H.D.T.A., 24 May [Video]. Copy preserved in the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (1988). Sequencing. In K. Harvey and K. Williams (Eds.), *Aspects of drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote talks about sequencing, planning, styles of teaching and other topics* (pp. 7-17). Kohia Teachers Centre.

Heathcote, D. (1991a). *Making drama work: Curriculum matters*, Tape 8 [Video]. University of Newcastle.

Heathcote, D. (1991b). *Dorothy Heathcote video archive, Series B, vol. 1: Frame distancing; outline of drama planning and sequence (M.A. Studies)* [Video]. University of Central England. Copy preserved in the Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (1991c). *Dorothy Heathcote video archive, Series B, vol.*

3: Frame distancing; episodes (M.A. Studies) [Video]. University of
    Central England. Copy preserved in the Dorothy Heathcote
    Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Heathcote, D. (1992a). "Stewardship: A paradigm for education?"
    NATD Broadsheet, *9* (3), pp. 8-23.

Heathcote, D. (1992b). *The thin screen* [Video]. University of
    Newcastle.

Heathcote, D. (2006). Conventions based on theatre practice but easily
    available to the classroom teacher. Unpublished manuscript.
    Dorothy Heathcote Archive, Manchester Metropolitan University.
    (Accompanied by letter to Eileen Pennington dated December 31.)

Heathcote, D. (2007, 9 February). National Association for the
    Teaching of Drama event, with Eileen Pennington, at the
    University of Warwick. Private audio recording.

Heathcote, D. (2010). Productive tension: A keystone in "Mantle of the
    Expert" style teaching. *The journal for drama in education*, *26* (1),
    pp. 8-23.

Heathcote, D. & Bolton, G. (1995). *Drama for learning: Dorothy
    Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach to education*.
    Heinemann.

Hesten, S. (1994). *[The construction of an archive and the presentation
    of philosophical, epistemological and methodological issues
    relating to Dorothy Heathcote's Drama in Education approach](#)*
    [Doctoral dissertation, University of Lancaster].

Hutchens, B. (2004). *Levinas: A guide for the perplexed*. Continuum.

Joldersma, C.W. (2008). The importance of enjoyment and inspiration
    for learning from a teacher. In D. Egéa-Kuehne (Ed.), *Levinas and
    education: At the intersection of faith and reason* (pp. 43-55).
    Routledge.

Joldersma, C. W. (2014). *A Levinasian ethics for education's
    commonplaces: Between calling and inspiration*. Palgrave
    Macmillan.

Levi, P. (2017). *The drowned and the saved* (R. Rosenthal, Trans.).
    Simon and Schuster.

Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Duquesne
    University Press.

Levinas, E. (1989). Ethics as first philosophy. In S. Hand (Ed.), *The
    Levinas Reader* (pp. 75-87). Blackwell Publishers.

Levinas, E. (1991). *Otherwise than being* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Kluwer

Academic Publishing.

Levinas, E. (2006). *Entre nous* (M.B. Smith & B. Harshav, Trans.). Bloomsbury.

Llewelyn, J. (2002). *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas*. Indiana University Press.

Matusiak-Varley, B. (2016). [*Dorothy Heathcote: A model for alchemical leadership*](#) [Doctoral dissertation, Durham University]. Durham e-theses.

Nietzsche, F. (1956). *The birth of tragedy and the genealogy of morals* (F. Golffing, Trans.). Doubleday.

Oliver, K. (2001). *Witnessing: Beyond recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Pöggeler, O. (1987). West-East dialogue: Heidegger and Lao-tzu. In G. Parkes (Ed.), *Heidegger and Asian thought* (pp. 47-78). University of Hawaii Press.

Raffoul, F. (2010). *The origins of responsibility*. Indiana University Press.

Simon, R. (2003). Innocence without naivete, uprightness without stupidity: The pedagogical *kavannah* of Emmanuel Levinas. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *22* (1), pp. 45-59.

Strhan, A. (2012). *Levinas, subjectivity, education: Towards an ethics of radical responsibility*. Wiley.

Todd, S. (2003). *Learning from the Other: Levinas, psychoanalysis, and ethical possibilities in education*. State University of New York Press.

Zhao, G. (2018). Introduction: Levinas and the Philosophy of Education. In G. Zhao (Ed.), *Levinas and the philosophy of education* (pp. 1-8). Routledge.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

David Allen is Artistic Director of Midland Actors Theatre (UK). The company is currently lead partner on an Erasmus Plus project on Rolling Role, following previous projects on Mantle of the Expert and the Commission Model. David runs the Facebook group, "The Commission Model of Teaching," and the website www.mantlenetwork.com. He is the convenor of the annual *Dorothy Heathcote Now* conference. He is the author of numerous books and articles on drama including *Performing Chekhov* (1999) and

Stanislavski for beginners (1999/2015), and co-author (with Agata Handley) of "The Commission Model of teaching" (*Saber & Educar, 31* (1), 2022).

Agata Handley is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź, Poland. Her main areas of interest are: contemporary British poetry; the culture of the English North; memory studies, and intermedial issues. She is the author of *Constructing identity in the poetry of Tony Harrison* (2016/2021). She is Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*. Her current research includes ekphrasis in anglophone literature and culture, and intertextuality in music videos. Recent articles include "The poet as public intellectual: Tony Harrison's war poetry" (*British Journal of Educational Studies*, *70* (5), 2022).

Illuminating SEL Through the Arts: How Can Creative Drama Be Used to Support SEL Education for Young Children?

VICTORIA ISOTTI

EMERSON COLLEGE

ABSTRACT

The importance of integrating Social-Emotional Learning into classrooms cannot be underestimated. This study seeks to find the challenges and successes of using creative drama to support SEL for young children. It investigates students' social and emotional status, the SEL strategies students already use when feeling big emotions, and their opinions of drama lessons. Methods of data collection include a review of literature and research and interviews with five children between the ages of three and seven. Suggestions for teachers' approaches to SEL education and recommendations for an SEL-based creative drama curriculum are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Over the summer of 2022, I worked as the summer program director and drama teacher for an urban school in Massachusetts, where I am currently in my fifth year of teaching. I had a young student who while being a kind, smart, and curious child, was struggling socially and emotionally. When this student felt emotions, they would take over, and he would begin to exhibit behaviors that could be described as self-destructive. However, the other teachers and I felt that this student was making progress. We saw him taking time to cool down when upset, removing himself from upsetting situations, and showing empathy towards others even in disagreements. We were excited to see how he would further progress and would speak often of how we could continue to work with him to further develop his social-emotional development, such as with arts programming. Then the unthinkable happened: he transferred to another school, and we have not seen him since. It was because I was thinking of this student, how much progress he had made, and how much further he had to go that the idea of using creative drama for social and emotional growth came to mind.

This research explores the use of creative drama with preschool through second-grade students to support social-emotional learning. The study has two main goals: to gain an understanding of children's social-emotional development at this moment in time, and an understanding of both the draw-ins and drawbacks creative drama has for young children.

In conducting my initial research for this study, I found that a key component is missing from the existing literature: the voices of the children. In case studies speaking on how play can be successful, lessons are deemed successful by the teachers, but not by the children who were actively participating in the lesson. In doing my research, I set out to expand this narrative.

Young children deserve their opinions and experiences to impact their education, rather than to be told what to think. It is an injustice to young people for educators to not be thoughtful about their feelings, and to not teach them that their voices have merit. I value the voices and opinions of young children, and I am making their words and

actions the focus of my research.

METHODOLOGY

A total of five children were interviewed for this research: three-year-old Billy, five-year-old Esme, five-year-old Bob, seven-year-old Roselyn, and seven-year-old Megan. Three female-identifying children were interviewed, and two male-identifying children were interviewed. Every child mentioned in this study identifies as white. Each child interviewed was familiar to me before the interview. Parental consent was obtained, as well as each child's consent to participate. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' names for anonymity.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, is a buzzword that is often thrown around by educators but is rarely defined. To truly understand SEL, you have to first break it down into two parts: social learning and emotional learning. Social learning includes the skills that allow children to relate to others effectively and to contribute in positive ways to their family, school, and community. It is how people relate to and interact with others. Emotional learning is the ability to recognize emotions and regulate strong emotions to maintain effective relationships with others. Emotional learning addresses a person's feelings and how they respond to others' feelings. Social-emotional learning as a whole is the combination of social development and emotional understanding. Putting those definitions together, SEL is learning the skills to recognize and regulate your own emotions while having empathy and understanding for other people and their emotions (Kirk & Jay, 2018).

SEL can be broken down into five competencies per the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, better known by its acronym CASEL. These are Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making (CASEL, 2022). Each competency has specific identifiers. For Self-Awareness, key aspects to observe include identifying emotions, self-perception, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and the ability to recognize strengths. Self-Management includes stress

management, impulse control, and goal setting, among others. Social Awareness includes empathy, perspective-taking, respect for others, and appreciating diversity. Relationship Building includes communication and teamwork. Responsible Decision Making includes identifying problems, solving problems, and reflecting, among other identifiers (Bridges, 2002).

Teachers have the direct ability to foster classrooms that support social-emotional learning. The most discussed skill for teachers to utilize when promoting SEL in their class is developing positive relationships with students. Kirk and Jay promote the creation of strong relationships between students and educators for the purpose of evaluating SEL skills and say sustained shared thinking contributes to positive relationships since emotional connections are formed when sustained shared thinking happens regularly.

Children's In-Body Responses

I collected children's in-body responses to certain emotions as data. I did this to determine student skills in Self-Awareness, specifically evaluating the identification of emotions. For example, I can identify when I am feeling nervous because I feel butterflies in my stomach. Understanding where children feel emotions in their bodies could be key in discussing how to identify and manage these emotions as part of their SEL-based curriculum.

When it comes to feeling happy, many children reported feeling happiness in their faces and minds. However, Roselyn (age seven) said that when she feels happy, she "feels it everywhere." When it comes to feeling sad, answers from children vary. Billy (age three) pointed to his heart when asked where he felt sad in his body. Roselyn (age seven) said she feels it in her arms and legs, saying "Sometimes I get goosebumps." Megan (age seven) feels sadness in her head, right near her temples. When it comes to feeling angry, children said they felt this emotion in their heads, faces, hearts, and stomachs.

Esme (age five) and Bob (age five), who were interviewed together, spoke at length about where anger is for them:

Victoria: So when you're angry, what does your face do? Esme: It scrunches!

Victoria: What happens to the rest of your body when you feel

angry? Where do you feel it in your body?

Esme: In my heart.

Victoria: You feel it angry in your heart. Where do you (Bob) feel angry in your body?

Bob: In basically my whole stomach.

In thinking about supporting children's SEL, I feel that talking about in-body responses to emotions is vital since identifying emotions is a key "look for" of Self-Awareness. In creating a drama curriculum that supports SEL, addressing in-body responses could play a big role in lessons that surround Self-Awareness and Self-Management.

Children's Emotional Recall & Recognition

I asked students to share stories of times they felt certain emotions, and times when they saw other people experiencing certain emotions. This was to determine students' skills in Self-Awareness since the key factors of this competency are identifying emotions, and Social Awareness since the key factors of this are empathy and perspective taking (Bridges, 2002).

Students excelled in identifying their own emotions. Every student told a story about a time when they were happy. Many students were also able to speak about a time when they were sad. The exception to this was Billy (age 3). During our interview, he said the following:

Victoria: Can you tell me about a time when you felt sad at school?

Billy: (whispers) Yeah.

Victoria: When did you feel sad at school?

Billy: (whispers) I don't know.

While he was saying this, his face dropped, he looked as if he was about to cry, and he whispered his sentences. I feel his hesitation in sharing a story about a time when he was sad is because thinking about being sad in the past made him begin to feel sad in the present

moment. He could not separate past sad moments from his current emotional state. This was not an issue with any of the other interviewees. It is most likely due to age, with Billy being only three years old and the other interviewees being five and up.

These stories show that students, no matter what age, have a good sense of Self-Awareness. They know how to identify their emotions, and can clearly recall a time when they have felt different emotions. However, sometimes going back to memories tied to certain emotions can cause emotional reactions. Billy (age three) shows this since he became sad at the thought of having to tell a sad story. This is something to be aware of when working with young children and talking about emotions.

In recognizing other people's emotions, students seem to have a good sense of identifying the feelings of others. When specifically asked to identify a time a friend was feeling sad, every child was able to tell a story. Some children spoke of times when they helped to comfort their friend. Roselyn (age seven) spoke about a time when a friend was down and she tried to cheer her up:

> Roselyn: Well, I also had a time when, um, her little brother, who was like two, uh, um, broke her favorite glass… And she was so sad and I did it. I cheered her up by making her, by telling her that we can make a fort and picking on, um, their, her little brother and all the boys.

However, not every student told a story where they were the person who helped to comfort their friend. Billy (age three) spoke about a specific time he saw a friend be sad, but he did not do anything to help:

> Billy: Anya. Anya, she was here yesterday...she got in there. She zoomed down there.
>
> Victoria: Yeah? Why did she do that?
>
> Billy: Cuz she was about to cry.
>
> Victoria: She was about to cry. Why was she about to cry?
>
> Billy: Cuz she was sad.

Victoria: She was sad. Did you help her?

Billy: (Nods)

Victoria: What did you do to help her?

Billy: I don't know.

Billy (age three) was not able to attempt to cheer a friend up, while Roselyn (age seven) was, even if it was not in the most positive manner. Age may be a factor in this, and Roselyn being seven and Billy being three years old may be the reason why Roselyn was able to cheer a friend up and not Billy. It is a skill that takes time to develop- Roselyn may be at a place socially and emotionally that Billy is not.

Social awareness was seen in every interviewee, no matter what age, with them being able to identify a time when another kid felt sad. However, not every child showed Relationship Skills or Responsible Decision Making skills in these stories. Some children spoke about a time when they tried to help cheer up a friend or make their friends' situation better, while others simply spoke from the perspective of an observer.

Children's SEL Strategies and Tools

Next, I identified the strategies used by the children to handle their "big emotions" to determine how young children practice Self-Management skills. Self-Management skills include impulse control, stress management, and self-discipline (Bridges, 2002). Identifying what children already do to manage these impulses and stress levels will then pave the way to understanding what needs to be addressed further.

The tools that children listed to calm down from emotions such as sadness, anger, and nervousness were substantial. In speaking about calming down from sadness, Megan (age seven) said "Sometimes I like to read a book or watch my iPad if I'm at home, and at school, I just like to talk to my friends and stuff like that."

In speaking about how to calm down after feeling angry, Bob (age five) and Esme (age five) in their joint interview spoke about how they calm down.

Victoria: Right. What if you're a little angry? How do you react then?

Bob: I feel basically it's, I just, like if I get medium angry. You know what happens really close to being fine but not that close. Like it, like, 10 inches off from no nine or eight inches off from that. So eight inches off would be like was when I have to, he wouldn't gimme something back that was actually so you, you know what happened. So I just go to my bed, and like need some calming down.

Victoria: What else do you do to calm down?

Esme: When I calm down I pet my dog.

Many children's calm-down strategies that they mentioned in interviews, such as the ones above, are ones that they cannot implement at school. The only interviewee who came up with a viable calm-down strategy that can be done anywhere is Roselyn (age seven), who spoke about taking deep breaths until she feels calmer.

When I asked students about going to teachers to help with their emotions, I got varying responses. Bob (age five), became very nervous from this question. His shoulders shot up, his smile dropped, and his tone of voice shifted. The interaction went as follows:

Victoria: Bob, Why is it, Why don't you talk to teachers about how you feel?

Bob: I just don't.

Victoria: You just don't. Well, I can see you tensing up right now. What are you feeling right now when you're saying that?

Bob: Tiny bit nervous.

Meanwhile, Bob's younger brother Billy (age three) spoke at ease about how his teachers have helped him calm down when he is feeling nervous.

Victoria: Do other people help you feel not nervous anymore?

Billy: Yeah.

Victoria: Yeah, who helps you?

Billy: The teachers.

Victoria: The teachers, what did the teachers do to help you?

Billy: Read books to me.

While some children are comfortable talking to a teacher about their emotions, only some children want to seek help from a teacher. This could be an aspect of Relationship Building, where some students have a positive relationship where they can talk to a teacher while other kids are just not there in terms of relationships. It could also be an individual student's anxiety. It is difficult to determine the exact reason why, especially when the students themselves cannot identify why they will not go to a teacher.

In thinking about Self-Management strategies as a whole, I feel that this is an area that needs to be worked on with young children. Not every child was able to identify a calm-down tool or technique suitable for every location. Even when a young child knows in theory that they should use an SEL tool, such as taking a deep breath, the data does not show whether or not students consistently utilize these tools, so I am unsure of how effective each skill truly is for children.

CREATIVE DRAMA

Play is a powerful tool that is sometimes overlooked in the field of education. In The Dramatic Difference: Drama in the Preschool and Kindergarten Classroom, it is stated that, "the child's primary mode of learning is through physical interaction with their environment", and "in the early years, interactions with the environment occurs primarily through play and imitation" (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 2). Through play and interactions with peers and teachers, children develop communication skills, conversational routines, and oral vocabulary. Play also enhances self-regulation skills by teaching children how to

regulate behaviors and emotions while interacting with peers (Taylor & Boyer, 2019).

Creative drama is an enhanced form of play. It is described as a learning medium, "emerging from the spontaneous play of young children and utilizing the art of theatre to build and enhance the participants' artistic sensitivity, awareness of self, others, and the world and develop each child's dramatic imagination" (Pinciotti, 1993). Creative drama is, unlike other forms of drama, intended for its participants rather than an audience (Szecsi, 2008). It is an inherently collaborative art form, always done as a group. Activities that fall under the umbrella of creative drama include improvisation, role-playing, pantomime, movement, and gesture (Pinciotti, 1993).

Creative drama can teach many skills. Pinciotti (1993) states that dramatic learning as a whole teaches "knowledge, skills, feelings, and dispositions in four categories: dramatic behaviors and theatre skills, imagery and imagination, group development, and the connection of imagination and action." Hensel (1991) says that creative drama activities help develop skills of social sensitivity and conflict resolution.

Drama is a great tool for working with children. When specifically working with young students, "classroom drama is process-oriented" and, "presenting plays with young children is not recommended, particularly in a formal setting" (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 3). Children participating in drama are meant to learn through experience, with methods "ranging from spontaneous drama initiated by a child's curiosity to drama work that is planned and guided by a teacher with specific educational goals in mind" (Brown and Pleydell, 1999, p. 3).

Drama Draw-Ins

In interviews, I asked students what drama activities they enjoyed to get a sense of how drama is engaging for them. All of these students are often led in activities involving pantomime, improvisation, puppetry, and tableaux work. The younger students I interviewed stated that they enjoyed activities that allowed them to play pretend. Esme (age five) spoke of liking activities where she gets to act like animals like "a piggy and a horse" because it makes her "feel silly." Esme and Bob's class in particular is led in drama activities that allow for improvisation and character embodiment, including the game she is referring to entitled "Will You Cross My Swamp" in which students must transform their bodies and voices into different animals and creatures to cross the

"swamp" (the classroom).

Their class is also led by the teacher in many movement-oriented activities, which the students reportedly enjoy participating in. The game Esme named her favorite was freeze dance because she gets "to have fun and dance and freeze" but also "cause so we get to take a break when we're out." Bob (age five) spoke about enjoying doing a shakedown with his arms and legs, or as he referred to it "that calming down like shake body", saying it made him feel good.

I also found that older students spoke at length about enjoying the creative aspects of drama classes. Megan (age seven) spoke about enjoying tableaux work in drama classes and the creativity that comes with those exercises. In speaking about a game entitled "I Am A Tree", where students one by one become one object or character of their choice that would surround a tree to make a large tableau, she said the following:

> Megan: Because it's just fun cuz you can kind of be whatever you wanna be in the scene, and the trust and choice like, yeah.

> Victoria: Do you like having a choice? Megan: Uh, yes.

> Victoria: Why is that?

> Megan: Because when you have a choice, you can be really creative.

While the younger students and the older students may have had different ways of phrasing it, the message of these interviews is clear: children enjoy drama best when they get to actively pretend, create, and move around in class. This data shows that providing the opportunity for children to have fun and create in class while addressing important content may be the key to high engagement.

Drama Dislikes

I also collected data about what kids dislike about drama. I found that the majority of interviewees had nothing to say about disliking any activities. Bob, Esme, and Megan were all asked about this, and all had nothing to say in terms of dislikes. Part of this could very well be that they always enjoy the activities done in drama class. They may

have also felt discomfort in sharing what they dislike since I am their drama teacher.

Roselyn (age seven) was the exception to this, saying the following:

Roselyn: Don't like, um, I don't really like when, um, like other things, like copy, copy ours.

Victoria: Yeah. So you don't like it when people copy your idea?

Roselyn: Totally. Yeah. Like copy, really copy, copy.

Victoria: Yeah. Um, how does it make you feel?

Roselyn: It makes me feel mad.

While the other children did not mention this as a downside to participating in drama, there is a possibility that it could be an annoyance for them to see others copying their original ideas, so it is something to be aware of.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above research, I recommend that all five social-emotional competencies can and should be introduced to young children. These students' knowledge in Self-Management, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making varied based on the interviews, with some children showing emerging skills in these competencies while others did not show any.

Students verbally showed Self-Awareness and Social Awareness in their specific answers, but that does not mean that their knowledge is put into practice. All of the SEL competencies can be introduced to children and improved upon, especially as they tend to develop with age, so giving young children the basis of understanding all five is key to their SEL growth.

I found that many of the calm-down techniques that children have may not translate well in public, such as Megan saying she likes to calm down with her iPad. Introducing calm-down techniques for Self-Management that can be done anywhere could be highly beneficial for

young children to learn and apply to their everyday life. Leading the class in specific role-plays where students can practice taking deep breaths when upset, asking for breaks, or using a physical calm-down tool for stress management could be helpful for this purpose.

Given that many students spoke about enjoying drama, and with only one dislike being mentioned, I do recommend using drama to support an SEL curriculum. Drama is an engaging subject where students can have fun, and contributes to an active learning environment that best suits young children's needs. Creative drama will allow for students to learn SEL concepts in a hands-on manner, and give space for students to practice SEL techniques and strategies for everyday life.

Educators should utilize activities that involve role-play and improvisation which will then lead to high student engagement, such as "Will You Cross My Swamp" which was mentioned before, or role-playing scenarios with puppets. Students also reported enjoying movement-oriented activities, and games such as freeze dance and "Night at the Museum", where students freeze as statues in a museum and can only move when the teacher is not looking, can be utilized in the classroom for engagement purposes.

I would also suggest providing activities where students get to lead parts of an activity, rather than solely the teacher, especially since students spoke about enjoying having choices in lessons. An example of a game like that provides this opportunity is "Simon Says", where students can work on their Social Awareness skills because the game requires them to deeply listen to others and follow directions. Another example comes from Brown & Pleydell (1999), where the teacher presents the problem of being stuck in a whale, and the group has to brainstorm how to get out together. The teacher makes sure to "give all the children an opportunity to talk" while encouraging original ideas from each student, and then acting it out (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 11). A group problem-solving role play such as this could develop Responsible Decision Making Skills while also fulfilling the children's desire to have choice.

LIMITATIONS

All children interviewed are students at the same school. Their point of view is therefore limited, especially when speaking about school

matters and teacher interactions. Their opinions on drama are also coming from a biased point of view- they are being asked about drama by one of the people who teach their drama classes, in the same building where they take those drama classes. This familiarity with the interviewer may have skewed some answers. Were I to continue research, I would interview students from different schools in different areas and see how the results vary and change.

Another major limitation of this study is that all the students interviewed are white, cis-gendered, and able-bodied. If I were to continue my research, I would diversify the group of students interviewed. A more diverse pool would expand the findings of this study, and lead to a greater understanding of SEL in all young children.

CONCLUSION

Young children's social and emotional learning status was overall more developed than expected. Students have a good sense of Self-Awareness and Social Awareness, being able to identify times when they felt certain emotions and identify times when others felt these emotions. However, there is an apparent lack of Self-Management, Relationship Building, and Responsible Decision Making. These skills can be addressed and developed with young children, and educators like myself have the opportunity to do this in our work.

While a creative drama curriculum is not going to be the end-all-be-all solution for students' SEL development and growth, creative drama can be an engaging and fun way to teach SEL strategies and tools to young children. If creative drama provides the opportunity for children to play, pretend, and make choices, it can then open the doors for students to grow and succeed on their social-emotional learning journey.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Isotti, V. (2023). Illuminating SEL through the arts: How can creative drama be used to support SEL education for young children?. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. 75-90.

REFERENCES

Advancing social and emotional learning. CASEL. (2022, October 14). Retrieved December 4, 2022.

Bridges, C. A. (2022, November 4). A guide to the core SEL competencies [+ activities and strategies]. Panorama Education. Retrieved May 7, 2023.

Brouillette, L. (2012). Advancing the speaking and listening skills of K-2 English language learners through creative drama. *TESOL Journal, 3* (1), pp. 138–145.

Brown, V., & Pleydell, S. (1999). *The dramatic difference: Drama in the preschool and Kindergarten Classroom*. Heinemann.

Edgar, S. N., & Elias, M. J. (2020). Setting the stage for social emotional learning (SEL) policy and the arts. *Arts Education Policy Review, 122* (3), pp. 205–209.

Farrington, C.A.., Maurer, J., Asaka McBride, M. R., Nagaoka, J., Puller, J. S., Shewfelt, S., Weiss, E. M., Wright, L. (2019). Arts education and social-emotional learning outcomes among K-12 students. UChicago Consortium on School Research. Retrieved November 20, 2022.

Hensel, N. H. (1991). Social leadership skills in young children. *Roeper Review, 14* (1), pp. 4–6.

Kılıç, Z., & Oğuz Namdar, A. (2021). The effect of creative drama-based activities on acquisition of values by 5-year-olds. *International Journal of Progressive Education, 17* (1), pp. 392–403.

Kirk, G., & Jay, J. (2018). Supporting kindergarten children's social and emotional development: Examining the synergetic role of environments, play, and relationships. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 32* (4), pp. 472–485.

Kirk, G., & MacCallum, J. (2017). Strategies that support Kindergarten Children's social and emotional development: One teacher's approach. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 42* (1), pp. 85–93.

Omasta, M., Graham, M., Milling, S. L., Murray, E., Jensen, A. P., & Siebert, J. J. (2020). Social emotional learning and the national core arts standards: A cross-disciplinary analysis of policy and practices. *Arts Education Policy Review, 122* (3), pp. 158–170.

Park, J. (2019). A comparison of the pretending elements of constructive play and pretend play. *The Turkish Online Journal of*

Educational Technology, 18 (4).

Pinciotti, P. (1993). Creative drama and young children: The dramatic learning connection. *Arts Education Policy Review, 94* (6), pp. 24–28.

Stubbs, V. D. (n.d.). The 6 pillars of a brave space. Retrieved April 24, 2023.

Szecsi, T. (2008). Teaching strategies: Creative drama in preschool curriculum: Teaching strategies implemented in Hungary. *Childhood Education, 85* (2), pp. 120–124.

Taylor, M. E., & Boyer, W. (2019). Play-Based Learning: Evidence-based research to improve children's learning experiences in the kindergarten classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 48* (2), pp. 127–133.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Victoria Isotti (she/her) received her MA/MFA from Emerson College in May 2023. She has a BA in Theatre from Suffolk University. She has worked as an educator for children ranging from Pre-K-8th grade at multiple schools, community centers, and summer camps in Massachusetts. Her current research centers on drama education for young children to support social-emotional learning.

Three Problems and Three Plays for the High School Stage

ALEX ATES

WESTTOWN SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

There are plays and musicals that are produced consistently every year—even every decade—by United States high schools. This article identifies three problems with that predicament: 1) the educational theater industrial complex, 2) the 24-year delay, and 3) dissonance from contemporary diversity efforts and standards. In the second part of the article, the author engages in reflective practice as a high school educator. The analysis fixates on a "reverse engineering" process where three new plays by professional playwrights are incubated directly for a high school stage in conversation with the school community.

PART ONE: THREE PROBLEMS

In the Educational Theatre Association's (EdTA) 2021-22 annual report of the most-produced plays on U.S. high school stages, there were some familiar titles. (*Dramatics*, 2021). Consider the table outlining the most-produced musicals:

Ranking	Title	Broadway or Off-Broadway Production Date*	Age in Years as of 2022	Notes
1	*Mamma Mia!*	2001	21	N/A
2	*All Together Now!*	N/A	N/A	This production was a special revue fundraiser organized in November 2021
3	*The Addams Family*	2010	12	Based on the cartoon illustrations originally published in 1938.
4	*The Spongebob Musical*	2017	5	Based on the animated television series that premiered in 1999.
5	*Disney's Beauty and the Beast*	1994	28	Based on the 1991 animated film.
6	*You're a Good Man Charlie Brown*	1971	51	Based on the comic strip that first appeared in newspapers in 1950.
7	*Little Shop of Horrors*	1982	40	N/A
8	*Into the Woods*	1987	35	N/A
9	*Disney's The Little*	2008	14	Based on the 1989 animated

(tie)	*Mermaid*			film of the same name.
10 (tie)	*Disney's Newsies*	2012	10	Based on the 1992 film of the same name.

*Production dates referenced by the Internet Broadway Database, produced by the American Theatre Wing.

Table 1. Top 10 Most-Produced High School Musicals in 2021-22 (EdTA)

National Public Radio (NPR) has organized EdTA's U.S. high school production data dating back to the 1940s (NPR, 2020). On NPR's data dashboard, there are 17 common musicals and 16 common plays that you can track through the generations. I bet you can name most of them, if not all: *Bye Bye Birdie, Guys and Dolls, The Crucible, The Miracle Worker*—go on, you know the rest!

Certainly, this canon of common plays creates a culture that some find nostalgic, charmingly Americana, or even connective beyond typical geographic or political divisions. After all, teenagers in California and Texas do *Mamma Mia*. However, this stasis of predictability deserves examination. Sure, some will argue that there are "oldies but goodies." But what makes them good, and for whom? What does "good" even mean in the context of educational theater performance? Defining the term could unpack a concept. This essay understands "good" as a production that is resoundingly constructive as an experience for students and faculty. Predictable stories are good insofar that repetition and transference is in the nature of storytelling, communication, and education. Often-produced performances transfer stories through generations and this is constructive.[1] Further, predictable stories allow students to enter into the production process with some prerequisite knowledge of the material, thereby allowing them to dig deeper into the material sooner. However, this prerequisite knowledge can also create a mirage of the "way the performance *should* be done" which is creatively inhibitive to a student's artistic development and thereby, not constructive. Adult audiences and educators reminiscently view status quo performances as a reanimation of their own experiences. Indeed, adolescence is one of the most evocative development periods for self-identity (Pfeifer and

---

[1] This is the premise of the Classical Education pedagogy and, while growing increasingly politicized, is a valid and useful pedagogical approach.

Berkman, 2018). It's possible that adult audiences aim to nostalgically recall or transfer identity-relevant values from their own adolescence onto current students. However, this intention is not constructive, it's a replica of a once-constructive experience.

Problem One: The Theater Education Industrial Complex

From the 2021-22 data collected from 1,941 EdTA-member schools in the United States, three problems can be observed. First, the most-produced full-length productions on high school stages typically fall into one of three categories:

1. **Classics:** productions that one could reasonably categorize as being cemented into an American or Eurocentric canon of Western dramatic literature, (i.e., Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Thorton Wilder's *Our Town*).
2. **Commercials:** productions with well-known origins as commercial (i.e., for-profit) Broadway productions (i.e., *Mamma Mia*, *The Addams Family*, *Disney's Newsies*).
3. **Breakouts:** productions that have settled into a definitive high school canon that have distinctly Off-Broadway origins (i.e., *Almost Maine* by John Cariani and *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen).

The predictability of these categories not only emboldens a theater education industrial complex that financially benefits conglomerate businesses (e.g., Disney Theatrical Group, Music Theatre International (MTI), Concord Theatricals, etc.) but it creates a status quo for high school stages that is *re-creative*—not *creative*. Or, to put it another way: a Xerox copy of a Xerox copy.

Theater Industrial Complex: The commercial system of conglomerated corporate publishing agencies that financially benefit from a limited and predictable status quo of production selections performed by high school programs in the United States.

Is this the true potential of theater as an art? It is not. And it's not what we should be teaching our students when they are most at their imaginative prime. Consider the following graphic for phases of

theater-making:

Phase	Phases of Theater-Making
1	Development of material (sometimes known as "playmaking")
2	Original interpretation of the world of the play and characters
3	Rehearsals
4	Performance(s)
5	Audience discourse, reaction, and application

Table 2. The five phases of theater-making.

The first four phases are innate to the creative process; the fifth phase, the impact on the audience, is out of the artists' hands. When schools produce "Top-10" productions, they are only activating stages 3-4 of the 4-part artistic process outlined—only half. To put it another way, "Top-10" productions are the theatrical equivalent to frozen meals ready to eat. It comes to you cooked and packaged—just heat up and *bon appétit*! More offensively, educational directors and designers often plagiarize directing and production designs from professional productions via YouTube or other streaming services, legal or not, inadvertently or intentionally (Viker, 2010). Further, it's well-known that students will often replicate and plagiarize acting choices via bootleg videos and cast recordings (this would be a fascinating topic for further research).

Problem Two: The 24-Year Delay

Second, there is a distinct delay from when productions receive their premiere commercial production and when they get to the high school stage. The average delay from when an EdTA top-ten musical travels from professional stage to educational stage is 24 years.[2] But,

---

[2] This does not include the delay between the production and the inception of the material of the musical into the cultural zeitgeist such as *The Addams Family*, which entered American culture via *The New Yorker* 84 years prior to 2022. Or, consider *Charlie Brown* and *The Peanuts* which entered the culture 72 years prior to 2022. Of course, these are just considering musical productions. On the most produced plays

what's the problem with a 24-year delay? Isn't a play's longevity a testament to its viability and quality? Certainly, plays that have been produced for so long have the benefit of longitudinal success and refinement. The 24-year delay is innate problematic because it's a delay and such a delay becomes more pronounced when matters of diversity and representation are considered. The field of theater has changed significantly in 24 years.

Problem Three: The Diversity Discrepancy

In 1999, 24 years prior to 2023, the Theatre Communications Guild (TCG) listed the top ten most-produced playwrights by professional member theaters in the United States. Two were female, eight were male, and seven were white (*American Theatre*, 1998). In the 2022-2023 season, TCG demonstrated that out of the top ten most-produced playwrights, half were of the top-ten writers female-identifying and half were Black or People of Color (*American Theatre*, 2022).[3] The demographic data referenced in this article is assembled and categorized based on an analysis of the playwright's official and most-up-to-date biography. By way of comparison, in 2021-22, out of the top ten most-produced playwrights on high school stages in the United States, 9 were white and 8 were male-identifying, seven were both white and male-identifying.

In comparing these two data sets, what is revealed is an undeniable discrepancy between gender and racial diversity representation of playwrights on the stages of professional theaters and high school theaters in the United States. This is why the 24-year delay matters. In 24 years, the field of theater in the United States experienced significant diversification in the most-produced playwrights; educational stages did not experience this same shift. On average, 34.2 million more Americans see high school theater per year than Broadway theater at its most well-attended. According to EdTA's data, an estimated 49 million audience members viewed high school productions in 2021-22 (*Dramatics*, 2021). In 2018-19, the year before

---

list in 2022, number three was the 427-year-old *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

[3] This data was assembled through the analysis of 551 member theaters along with Broadway houses. As a note, the 2022-23 data set is used because the organization did not make a top ten most-produced list for the 2021-22 season due to Covid-19-related programmatic impacts on its member theaters.

the pandemic shutdowns, The Broadway League reports that 14.8 million audience members attended Broadway productions—a record high (Broadway League, 2019). Given this data, educators must wonder: How important are production texts written by representatively diverse playwrights to high school theater education?

It has been widely researched that enhanced engagement and portrayal of diverse social identities benefits students and school communities (Armstrong, 2021). EdTA's data suggests that the majority of theater-going audiences are not exposed to diverse portrayals on high school stages. Of course, this means that students engaged in theater education generally aren't exposed to production materials written by non-white or non-male writers. This is not consistent with best practices in education and theater.

PART TWO: THREE PLAYS
Methods, Frameworks, and Approach
This article is not exclusively intended to problematize the state of high school productions. It is also an examination of responses to such a circumstance through on-the-ground praxis.

My positionality to this topic is direct; I am a high school theater educator who produces and directs educational productions. From here, I will engage in reflective practice and analysis on the approach we have taken on these problems at my institution. But first: on the framework: In the introduction to an anthology of reflective essays, *A Reflective Practitioner's Guide to (Mis)Adventures in Drama Education—or—What Was I Thinking* Peter Duffy synthesizes various definitions on reflective practice as such:

> In drama education, reflective practice is more than an analysis of which strategies embedded within one's lesson plan were efficacious… [reflective practice] is an honest accounting of the development that follows when one sets one's ego aside in order to pursue a more truthful, vulnerable, and student-centered practice. (Duffy, pp. 4-5)

What follows is a reflective analysis on my school's programmatic attempt to respond to the implications of the datasets outlined in the introduction of this article. To underline: this article is not a proposition

for a franchisable model packaged for replication. This case has unique circumstances, which I will aim to identify transparently. From this reflective analysis, relevant observations from the field might be inflected for the field at-large.

In order to keep the analysis grounded and practical, this section of the article will use the data of dates and timelines as a framework for surmising analysis, a la a director's log. But first, it is important to establish context for the environment where these activities have and are taking place.

Context: Westtown School

I teach at Westtown, a day and boarding school affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), founded in 1799. We have students from grades pre-kindergarten to 12th. Only upper school students board in dormitories on the 600 acre campus in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The school's pedagogy prioritizes Quaker mysticism and morals, which includes a pronounced commitment to social justice causes; Westtown, like other Friends Schools, has been historically progressive on topics relating to race, gender, and anti-violence. As Stephen C. Gary, former president of the Quaker college Haverford, once noted: Friends schools operate with a "moral dimension." (Cary, 322). This moral dimension has validated initiatives with a social justice rationale.

Westtown is an independent school. According to an institutional 2021-22 annual report, the school has a $27.2 million operating budget and $110.7 million endowment (Westtown, 2022). In addition to students who come from the United States, there are students from 13 other countries. 8.1 percent of students are international and 34.8 percent of students are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) (Westtown, 2022).

We have a newly-renovated 526-seat proscenium theater in a large arts center, which includes a scenic shop, costume shop, prop shop, orchestra pit, dressing rooms, and a rehearsal hall. There are three theater faculty members (myself included), two affiliated faculty, and typically one guest director per season. For grades 6-12, there is a curriculum for theater education. Productions, however, operate in a credit-bearing co-curricular program. On average, 13 students participate in plays and double that participate in musicals as actors in the upper school.

Reverse Engineering High School Play Development

I interviewed to be the director of theater at Westtown right before the Covid-19 shutdowns in 2020. By the time I entered the position, our school, like many others, was operating a virtual and in-person program to accommodate distance learning related to the spread of Covid-19. I have written about the international, digital devised work we created during that year in a prior edition of this journal.[4] As pandemic mitigation evolved, we planned for a return to live performances and I proposed an approach to programming plays for our upper school which I described as reverse engineering because instead of waiting for professional scripts to be available for performance on high school stages, we intentionally commissioned playwrights who were interested in writing for high school actors, whom I had collaborated with prior (and had, thus, vetted), and who could counteract the three problems.

> **Reverse Engineering:** The process of incubating, developing, and performing original plays intentionally-crafted by professional playwrights for high school students and school communities in educational settings with student actors, designers, and participants for general audiences.

Some will wonder, What is the difference between the concept of reverse engineering and the standard practice of new play development? Consider the New York City non-profit New Dramatists, founded in 1949 as a manifestation of Michaela O'Harra's "plan for playwrights." O'Harra's concept for New Dramatists consisted of six parts:

1) panel discussions
2) rehearsed readings
3) a workshop
4) craft discussions
5) production observations
6) theater admissions. (London, 2013)

---

[4] Ates, A., Feng, D., Hu, S., & Zhang, E. (2021). Measuring a verbatim effect with high school students 12 hours away and across the world. *ArtsPraxis, 8* (2), pp. 32-45.

Since its establishment, the New Dramatists model has seeped into the field at-large, academically and otherwise. In many ways, the reverse engineering initiative is rooted in the New Dramatists new play process. However, unlike New Dramatists, reverse engineering is more site-specific and demographic-specific. Reverse engineering is qualified by the distinct capabilities and capacities of the adolescent actor as represented by the students of the institution commissioning the play.

Representative Opportunities

Further consideration was given to student racial and gender demographics on campus with intentional planning regarding opportunities for representation and the importance of students seeing someone who embodies similar identities in their community writing plays. This effort was undergirded and validated by the school's public-facing intentions of becoming an anti-biased, anti-racist (ABAR) institution. There was an identity-conscious intentionality too. As gender identity continues to become more fluid (or less binary), I would work with playwrights to make characters gender-neutral or flexible—thereby individualizing students' gender preferences and also not pigeonholing casting decisions via the gender binary.

Hour-long Shows

These plays would be roughly an hour long. With limited—and often—compromised rehearsal time in educational settings, one-hour plays would allow us to use rehearsal time to run the entire show, give notes, and work problem spots each session. One-hour plays would not only benefit our process but our audiences would likely respond well to them. It has been well studied and reported that modern attention spans are adapting to a short-spurt entertainment landscape, motivated by modern media (Newman, 2010). One-hour plays would reduce the feeling of being held in captivity as an audience member.

Field Situation: Distinctions and Deviations

As Amanda Brown notes in her article "A Welcoming Space for Whom?: Race and Inclusion in Suburban High School Theater Programs" published in this journal, high schools with traditionally-white student populations consider casting conundrums for producing

musicals like *In The Heights* (Brown, 2020). Would it be productive for a theater program to produce such a show without the capability for identity-conscious casting? No. Further, would it be appropriate for the production to be reliant on the participation of students of color at-large to engage with the production for it to be a competent performance? No, that's not ethical either as it puts the moral weight on the students of color. Our initiative allows us to engage playwrights via participation in our program while allowing us to tailor-make casting opportunities that our community can meet demographically.

This approach to incubating plays within the school environment with professional playwrights was different in nature from Daniel Judah Sklar's well-known pedagogy of Playmaking outlined in his 1991 book *Playmaking: Children Writing and Performing Their Own Plays*. Similar to Sklar's process, new plays are incubated via a longform process designed to generate student-centered dramatic material and performance. However, the difference between Sklar's approach and this initiative is that our approach of reverse engineering incubates student-centered dramatic material by emeshing trained playwrights directly into our program and pedagogy by putting them in proximity to our school community.

Further, this consideration is distinct from play development processes outlined in such texts as Matt Omasta and Nicole B. Adkins' 2017 book *Playwriting and Young Audiences*, which generally focuses on the incubation of texts for professional productions. The reverse engineering programming initiative at Westtown School is similar to the approach of TADA! Youth Theater in New York City, which has been incubating and producing new musicals with youth ensembles since 1984, winning a Drama Desk Award in 2009. Now, let us consider three performances commissioned by Westtown School and incubated with its faculty and students as part of the reverse engineering initiative.

The Caretakers by Noelle Viñas

Image 1: Production image of *The Caretakers* by Noelle Viñas at Westtown School. Students performed with masks due to concerns over the spread of Covid-19. *Scenic and lighting design by Sarah Sullivan. Costume design by Heather Tannenbaum.*

Synopsis

Noelle Viñas developed a play about three teenagers who live in an unnamed metropolis decades in the future when the climate crisis has reached an inflection point: resources are low, weather is unpredictably dangerous, and ever-expanding cities are on the brink of collapse. While foraging for food to share with their families, the three teens stumble upon an abandoned shed (similar to one on Westtown's campus) which contains a portal into the future. The teens are transported into a future where a climate catastrophe has been averted through the creation of small, localized, hyper-resourceful communities which operate on a strict consensus model. The consensus model is developed so that no longer could the actions of a few determine the future of many. However, the collaborative governing model is too invasive: it determines jobs and lifestyles while curtailing impulsiveness, adventure, or independence. What first appears as a utopia to the teens slowly reveals itself as a dystopia of sorts. The teens, Max, Gunny, and Kit-Kat must decide if they want to return to

the past, where they now know collapses are imminent, or stay in this dystopian future forever.

Process

Month and Year	Activity
July 2020	- Once hired at Westtown, I immediately reached out to Viñas to assess if she would be interested in collaborating on such a project; Viñas is a former high school theater educator and I knew she would understand this assignment and context well. - Viñas confirmed and we established a retainer fee.
April 2021	- When the next academic year's budget was determined, an agreement was sent to Viñas and representation for approval. - A timeline for developing the play was determined.
May 2021	- Viñas met virtually with two sets of student focus groups. - The first group was an invited assortment of students who were associated with the school's theater program through curricular and non-curricular programming both on and off-stage. - The second group was an 8th grade acting class; these students were engaged as a means of establishing their relationship to the upper school theater program before they arrived as first-years.
July 2021	Viñas met virtually with several adult community stakeholders in the community including teachers, alums, parents, and staff in one-on-one virtual meetings. Viñas inquired about life at Westtown and how the community functions.
August 2021	Viñas visited Westtown's campus and observed distinct landmarks and hidden nooks. She also observed components of the campus' natural life.
September 2021	- Viñas developed a plot and gender-fluid characters and shared the initial concept with me; - Within a few weeks, a rehearsal draft was solidified.

November 2021	- Rehearsals begin with 13 upper school student actors. - During the early weeks of the rehearsal process, students provided feedback focused on clarifying questions and suggestions for character development. - Viñas generously accepted many of these offerings and they were incorporated into the next draft of the script.
December 2021	Production draft finalized and designs confirmed.
December 2021	- Viñas wrote lyrics to a song that would be sung a capella by the acting ensemble; - A colleague on the Music faculty composed the song in the style of a sacred harp hymn.
January 2022	- A variant of Covid-19 hit our community during our tech and dress process, we postponed performances of the production by a few weeks. - After a few weeks, our school was still navigating how to manage the variant and a surge in infections. - Within our acting company, several actors were exposed to infection or diagnosed with Covid-19, taking them out of dress rehearsals. - Our school began limiting attendance at community events to mitigate the spread of the virus. - We made the difficult decision to reduce the amount of performances to one night with the actors wearing masks on stage.[5] - The audience had to be socially distanced so we allowed students to invite two friends to the performance. - With Viñas' permission, we filmed the production and told families and our community they would have access to a performance link.

[5] The choice to have the actors wear masks was controversial within our community and production team, as some wanted the actors to test for the virus nightly; I made the decision that this would not be feasible or appropriate, given that the nation at-large was facing a shortage of Covid-19 rapid tests. In an informal survey of eight comparable Quaker schools in the United States who produced student performances from December 2021 through January 2022, all of them produced performances with students wearing masks on stage.

	● Viñas scheduled trip to campus was canceled.
February 2022	● A video link was shared with the school community and with families of the performers and backstage crew; this link was given a one-month timeline before it was removed out of consideration of intellectual property.

Table 3. This table details our collaboration from the time Viñas was hired through the sharing of the filmed production.

Impact

- Undeniably, the impact of having to modify the performances due to a variant surge of Covid-19 had a negative impact on the morale of the students and the community; this disappointment was inadvertently yet inevitably tied to the launch of the reverse engineering initiative.
- I hope, however, to revive *The Caretakers* in a future season, given that it has already been incubated, workshopped, and tested for viability in our community.
- Students in 8th Grade Acting read the play every semester and use scenes from *The Caretakers* for their unit on scene work and contemporary theater.

Takeaways

- We learned that we needed to initiate the script-writing process sooner for the benefit of the design team. The turnaround time between when the rehearsal draft was completed and when the co-curricular program for design and technology was too tight.
- After *The Caretakers*, colleagues began questioning the pedagogical intention of the reverse engineering initiative. Where is the room for canonical production praxis? While students are exposed to common plays in their curricular programming, the point was well-taken. So, how could we continue the spirit of the initiative while also creating a dynamic of variety between new work and classical work? This led to our next production project.

Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare, adapted by James Bartelle

Image 2: Maddie Moore-Barkley, a student at Westtown, portrays Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, adapted by James Bartelle. In Bartelle's adaptation, instead of wearing the iconic yellow cross-gartered attire, the character wears yellow cowboy boots and a hat. *Scenic design by Jack McManus. Lighting design by Justin Baker. Costume design by Amy Grebe.*

Overview

James Bartelle was commissioned to adapt one of Shakespeare's plays to be responsive to our community, conscious to our students' identities, more explicitly relevant to current events, and be an hour-long. *Twelfth Night* is considered one of Shakespeare's most iconic plays. The story is about two identical twins separated by a shipwreck, each thinking the other is dead only to be gloriously reunited. When Viola washes on the foreign shores of Illyria, she decides to disguise herself as a man, Cesario, to serve the duke of the land, Orsino. Orsino is in love with Olivia, the countess, but Olivia falls in love with Cesario (Viola in disguise). Meanwhile, Viola (disguised as Cesario) falls in love with Orsino. Concurrently, Olivia's butler, the pedantic Malviolio, is tricked into believing that Oliva is actually in love with him—a ridiculous and cruel prank. Sebastian (Olivia's twin brother) arrives at Illyria and is mistaken by Olivia for being Cesario. By the end of the play, all knots are undone but the consequences of the follies are yet to be seen and the comedy ends on an ambiguous, foreboding

note. Bartelle's adaptation streamlined the plot without losing any essential points and modernized language without losing the meter.

For students, the benefits of performing the play are vast. The play includes spectacular prose and poetry. Thematically, the play explores gender and social signifiers. Finally, the play offers a variety of dimensional and fascinating characters for students to study and explore.

Process

Month and Year	Activity
March 2022	- I requested that we consider a Shakespearean comedy that was flexible with gender, could run roughly an hour-long, have a vocal music component, and not be *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bartelle replied via email: "So… I mean… it should be *Twelfth Night*, right?" - I sent James a written agreement and retainer fee.
June 2022	- Bartelle crafted a first draft. - Bartelle's Process for adapting *Twelfth Night* included identifying terms that are so culturally-specific to an Elizabethan context that it carries virtually no significance to a modern audience. Bartelle adapted the language to carry more cultural relevance or meaning while still honoring the syllabic structure to maintain the verse. - One such adaptation was the iconic scene where the prattish Malvolio is tricked into trying to impress his boss, Olivia, whom he falsely believes loves him. In the classic scene, Malvolio attempts to woo Olivia by wearing embarrassing cross-gartered yellow stockings. The intention of this is that Malvolio is tricked into embarrassing himself. - In James' adaptation, Malvolio wears a large yellow cowboy hat and fluorescent boots.
July 2022	Second draft composed; Bartelle estimated that it was still running longer than an hour and would need to make additional cuts.

	● We engaged our frequent colleague the composer and lyricist Ayla Miller to compose a medley of a 'Capella songs from *Twelfth Night*.
Early August 2022	● A rehearsal draft was confirmed, it was shared with the design team. ● I decided to stage the production in the round on the stage of our proscenium; I not only did this to make the action of the play more immediate and intimate, I also did it as a means of simplifying the design world of the play.

Late August 2022	● Thirteen students auditioned for the production and all were placed in roles in the production.
	● The rehearsal process began with a pre-season week where the actors arrived on campus, alongside varsity athletes, to begin work on the play.
	  ○ This preseason week was critical, as we had prolonged rehearsal periods during the week where we could intensively study the play's dramaturgy, language, and themes.
	  ○ After the preseason week, we began staging.
	● Bartelle digitally visited rehearsals and the students were able to ask him questions about the play and his adaptive choices.

October 2022	● Three performances ran at the school—two evening performances and one matinee. The house was roughly 200 seats, given the on-stage and in-the-round concept. ● Bartelle visited campus during the performance run and participated in community events including interacting with the acting company, speaking in classes, and attending each performance.

Table 4. This table details our collaboration from the time Bartelle was hired through the performances.

Image 2: Adapting playwright James Bartelle meets with students during the instructional day to speak about the process of adapting Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in collaboration with the school community.

Impact

- We recognized the success and necessity of exposing our students to Shakespeare's plays not only as a matter of canonical education or as a means of expanding student vocabulary and performance range. Therefore, we committed to creating a pedagogical rotation of production programming, where we'd produce a new play incubated in collaboration with or in response to the community a la *The Caretakers* one fall and then in the next fall we'd adapt a classic.

Takeaways

- Classical theater and heightened language is still intriguing and relevant to contemporary students, presuming educators have the appropriate time and capacity to dig into the meaning and stakes of the material.
- By establishing a preseason week of longer-than-usual rehearsals strictly focused on studying and unpacking the text made an extreme difference for the production's productivity as

- well as the morale among the cast.
- Still, we learned we need to accelerate the development process even faster so the production design team can have a sufficient script sooner, particularly for the fall production slot. Design students need as much time to build as actors need to rehearse.
- Having Bartelle on campus was extremely beneficial for the reverse engineering initiative, as the community was able to see the direct connection between the writer and our community, page to stage.

It's Brutal Out There by Mark Galarrita

Synopsis

Mark Galarrita's *It's Brutal Out There* is set at an elite independent school much like Westtown, students are preparing for a competition focused on pitching digital applications (apps). With a growing computer science program at the school, these smart, capable students have the tools to develop apps that, if effective, could quickly enter the marketplace and change the world with viral speed. Tensions grow between students as they compete to create the most appealing and meaningful app. And an English teacher who is fixated on a student becoming a writer and public intellectual—and not a Silicon Valley techie—becomes obsessed with directing the student toward the humanities, not the tech industry—at whatever cost, including sabotage. Each of the students have ambition, dreams, and are competitive with their goals—and technology is key whether it's building a brand, impressing a venture capitalist, or gaining admission to an elite college that farms students to Silicon Valley. But what are the implications of all of this potential, all of this power?

Process

Month and Year	Activity
April 2022	● Galarrita jumps right out of the gate with a draft exploring topics of students, technology, and competition in an elite school environment.
May 2022	● Galarrita receives an agreement, our timeline is

	confirmed, and a retainer fee is provided. ● By expanding the timeline of development, Galarrita's fee expands over two fiscal years. ● I connected Galarrita with two seniors; One was a Duke-bound student who was engaging in a year-long playwriting independent study. The other student, Bennington-bound, was engaging in an individualized study in dramaturgy. We set up a conference call where Galarrita asked the students questions about their observations of the dramaturgical process for new plays incubated at Westtown. Galarrita gained insight from the two students about topics that are in the general zeitgeist among their peers. The conversation was equally beneficial to the students, who gained helpful tips and tutorials on playwriting and dramaturgy from Galarrita. ● Galarrita engaged the Bennington-bound student over the summer and contracted them as an independent dramaturg with compensation for their services. From this engagement, a student got their first gig as a dramaturg!
October 2022	● Galarrita submitted a second draft that aimed to balance ensemble scenes with monologues. ○ I requested that the script be monologue heavy to help students build their memorization skills and to provide them with potential college audition materials.
January 2023	● Students in the Advanced Theater class do a table reading of the second draft and it was audio recorded for Galarrita and for the design team. ● The students offered dramaturgical feedback on contemporary colloquialisms and references that are often used by teenagers in their environment. ● As an assignment, students in the class selected a monologue from the play to memorize, score, and perform.
February 2023	● The latest draft was shared with upper school administration and the department chairs of English and Computer Science.

	○ My pitch to the English department is that the script might be utilized in English classes next academic year and English teachers can assign prompts based on the page-to-stage experience; this would encourage student attendance at performances. ● The chair of the Computer Science program engaged his classes in dramaturgical support by mining their perspectives on accurate and relevant references for teenage technical engineers and coders.
March 2023	● Galarrita shared the third draft of the script; ● Almost one year after starting development of the play, almost five months before rehearsals begin, we have a functional rehearsal draft which has engaged a variety of stakeholders including students and colleagues. ● Designers begin preparing concepts for production.
May 2023	● Design meetings will begin for production.
August 2023	● Production meetings scheduled to begin; ● Rehearsals scheduled to begin during pre-season week.
October 2023	● Production scheduled to open.

Table 5. This table details our collaboration from the time Galarrita was hired through the scheduled performances.

CONCLUSION

The predictable carousel of certain established performance materials on high school stages in the United States leads to an educational theater industrial complex and puts high school performances on a 24-year delay that suffers from diversity dissonance. This article engages in reflective practice to assess an initiative to address the aforementioned circumstances. Below are some practical takeaways gleaned from the reflective analysis.

- When considering the overall impact of the initiative outlined,

one must consider both the students and the faculty equally—yes, equally.[6] There has yet to be any research or data gathering on the impact of the reverse engineering initiative among students and faculty. The feedback thus far has been anecdotal. However, if such data collection should occur, it would benefit from a wide timeline so the impact could be sufficiently measured through developmental stages.

- Reverse engineering engages more Phases of Theater-Making (Table 2) than participating in the educational theater industrial complex.

- Reverse engineering plays for one's high school program requires sufficient funding. It costs more to incubate new works as opposed to licensing pre-established scripts. Further, it takes far more time. *The Caretakers* had a 20-month development process; *Twelfth Night* had an eight-month adaptation process; *It's Brutal Out There* has a 19-month development process. For overworked educators, it is very tempting to get the play prepackaged, licensed, and ready to go. However, the long term uses and accommodations of homegrown plays is worth the cost.

- In the context of the professional field, advertising a show as a "world premiere" might excite some; however, students and community members are generally more concerned with regenerating material that they are familiar with in comparison to other institutions.

- Our plays were able to be responsive to matters that have direct relevance to our students. *The Caretakers* explored community and climate. *Twelfth Night* explored gender. *It's Brutal Out There*, tech and teens. Communicating the responsiveness of the plays is key to the success of the initiative.

- Educational institutions can play a role in the incubation and development of new American plays for teenage actors and the

---

[6] Some shudder at the concept: faculty engagement, satisfaction, creative engagement, and intellectual stimulation is equally important to the students'. Why? An engaged faculty is essential to an engaged student body within a school community. This is not a demented application of "trickle-down" logic; this is the reality of pedagogy!

> majority of the country's theater-going audiences.

As I wrote in a 2013 *HowlRound* article: "We don't need to knock at the doors of the established institutions, because we can open the doors ourselves. As new American theater artists, we can create the new American theater." I still believe this. I teach it to my students.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Ates, A. (2023). Three problems and three plays for the high school stage. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (1), pp. 91-115.

REFERENCES

Ates, A. (2013). Setting the Stage for a New Regional Theater. *Howlround*.

Armstrong, A. L. (2021). The Representation of Social Groups in U. S. Educational Materials and Why it Matters. New America.

Broadway League. (2019). The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2018-2019 Season. Retrieved March 20, 2023.

Brown, A. (2020). A welcoming space for whom? Race and inclusion in suburban high school theater programs. *ArtsPraxis*, 7 (2b), pp. 132-148.

Cary, S. G. (2003). *The intrepid Quaker: one man's quest for peace*. Pendle Hill.

Craft, P. (2021). 2021 Annual Play Survey. *Dramatics Magazine*.

Duffy, P. (2015). *A Reflective Practitioner's Guide to (Mis)adventures in Drama Education—or—What Was I Thinking?* Intellect.

London, T. (2013). *An Ideal Theater*. Theatre Communications Group, 465.

Nadworny, E. (2020). The Most Popular High School Plays And Musicals. *NPR*. Retrieved March 20, 2023.

Newman, M. Z. (2010). New media, young audiences and discourses of attention: from Sesame Street to 'snack culture.' *Media, Culture & Society, 32* (4), pp. 581–596.

Omasta, M. & Adkins, N. (2017). Playwriting and young audiences: collected wisdom and practical advice from the field. Intellect.

Pfeifer, J. H., & Berkman, E. T. (2018). The Development of Self and Identity in Adolescence: Neural Evidence and Implications for a Value-Based Choice Perspective on Motivated Behavior. *Child development perspectives, 12* (3), pp. 158–164.

Sklar, D. J. (1991). *Playmaking: children writing and performing their own plays.* Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Viker, E. (2010). I've seen that someplace else: Avoiding plagiarism in school theatre. *Teaching Theatre.*

Weinert-Kendt, R. (2022). 'Clyde's' Is Most-Produced Play, and Lynn Nottage Most-Produced Playwright, of 2022-23 Season. *American Theatre.* Retrieved March 20, 2023.

Westtown School. (2022). 2021-2022 Annual Report.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alex Ates is the director of Pre-K-12 Visual and Performing Arts at Westtown School. He has graduate degrees in interdisciplinary study from New York University and directing from The University of Alabama; his undergraduate degree is from Emerson College.