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The Backstage and Offstage Stories of Ethnodrama: A Review of Ackroyd & O'Toole's *Performing Research*

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Abstract

Performing Research: Tensions, Triumphs and Trade-offs of Ethnodrama, co-edited by Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole, is a substantive contribution to the ethnodramatic literature. Section A of *Performing Research* includes Ackroyd & O'Toole's reflections on selected issues surrounding ethnodrama, including such matters as terminology, ethics, representation, and aesthetics. In Section B, the developers of six different ethnodramatic productions offer their backstage and offstage accounts as case studies in playwriting, production development, and performance. This behind-the-scenes documentation provides those interested in the genre some wise and pragmatic advice before tackling their own arts-based research projects.

Introduction

Judith Ackroyd and John O'Toole (2010), two of the world's most respected figures in drama education, collaborate as co-editors to present a fascinating collection of students' and colleagues' work in the field of *ethnodrama*--also known as performance ethnography, verbatim theatre, and--from my own research--over 60 other variant terms (e.g., non-fiction playwriting, reality theatre, and conversational dramatism, to name just a few). *Performing Research* takes its readers backstage and offstage to reveal through confessional writing (van Maanen, 1988) the "tensions, triumphs, and trade-offs" of ethnodramatic play production.

Section A of *Performing Research* includes Ackroyd & O'Toole's reflections on selected issues surrounding ethnodrama, including such matters as terminology, ethics, representation, and aesthetics. In Section B, the developers of six different ethnodramatic productions offer their backstage and offstage accounts as case studies in playwriting, production development, and performance. This behind-the-scenes documentation provides those interested in the genre some wise and pragmatic advice before tackling their own arts-based research projects. Will Hammond and Dan Steward's (2008) *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* provides interviews with some of England's most distinguished verbatim theatre playwrights such as Robin Soans and David Hare. In *Performing Research*, readers get a grand tour of the genre with fieldwork in Australia and Hong Kong. The book focuses primarily on university academics' work and addresses only peripherally the professional/commercial ventures in ethnodrama.

Section A - Critical Musings on Ethnodrama

Ackroyd and O'Toole, as co-authors of this section, establish the mission and purpose of the work in their Preface:

This book sets out to stimulate and even create a critical dialogue about the live performance of research and research reportage that will both continue to map the territory and provide helpful signposts. . . . We wanted to interrogate and illuminate [the contributors' work] to aid both retrospective understanding and improved future practice. So we invited our brave discussants to create their own case studies, not just to chronicle their ethnodramatic achievements, but to scrutinise them together with us, within the critical frame of analysis provided by our exercise of mapping those tensions and assumptions. (pp. xviii-xix)

In Chapters 1-5, Ackroyd and O'Toole refer to the forthcoming case studies as they explore some of the major principles and conundrums of ethnodramatic playwriting and production. The co-authors justify the research-based art form eloquently when they promote:

Re-creating a research site through performance makes particularly good sense from a post-structuralist perspective. The phenomena of human behavior are so complex, so dynamic, so protean and so negotiable, . . . a form of reportage that maintains all the dimensions of the original interaction or observation can perhaps provide a valuable holding form. (p. 4)

Chapter 2 charts the territory of ethnodrama through a survey of its possible origins and a careful and thoughtful scrutiny of its related terms (verbatim theatre, performance ethnography, etc.). Chapter 3, "Responsibilities," critically examines some of the rather grand claims made by theorists and scholars of ethnodrama, particularly when it comes to the questionable power of the art form to initiate social change. The chapter also addresses the ethical minefields that await practitioners over issues of representation and presentation. The co-authors don't present any satisfactory answers or recommended guidance for such matters, but they do present some intriguing vignettes that may cause readers to reflect deeply on "What would *I* do if I was in that situation?"



Chapters 4 and 5 ("Ownership and Power" and "Aesthetic and Other Tensions") are Ackroyd and O'Toole's strongest chapters. Chapter 4 synthesizes the tensions faced by the Chapters 6-11 contributors with dramatic adaptation of their data. The co-authors wisely note that in "'honouring the data', the responsibility of the ethnodramatist is not only to consider the different views of the participants and weigh them up

against the interests of the audience but also to ensure that the piece moves beyond mono-messages" (p. 43). They address head-on the tensions with adaptation and dialogue construction, and reconcile that "Some change is inevitable since the adaptation moves from one art form to another. . . . There are differences in what can be achieved in different genres and responses to adaptations are often personal" (pp. 48-49). I have indeed personally wrestled with the most appropriate ways to "theatrically" stage my reality-based research, and I wholeheartedly agree with their assertion that "Ethnodramatists have the task of presenting real stories in performance in whichever way they feel will best tell their stories. Not being life-like may be the most effective way to depict life" (p. 51).

Ackroyd and O'Toole's final co-authored chapter continues the discussion with an overview of the aesthetics of ethnodrama suggested by their contributors' productions. They acknowledge

the paradox that an ethnotheatrical production is an artistic construction and thus a "fiction," according to noted Australian verbatim theatre playwright Paul Brown. But they also rationalize that "fictionalisation is not the same as a retreat from authenticity. It can enhance the truthfulness of the research as well as the experience of the audiences" (p. 64).

With readers framed with this background and context, *Performing Research* proceeds to six case studies.

Section B - Six Ethnodramas in Search of an Aesthetic

The exciting payoff to Section B is its backstage and offstage documentation from the contributors of *how* their ethnodramatic play scripts and ethnotheatrical productions were developed. Such accounts are rare in the literature, and *Performing Research* provides its readership with the critical decision-making processes that challenged these artists and educators.

Chapter 6: Jane Melissa Bird, Katriona Jane Donelan, Christine Sinclair, and Prudence Wales document their work as both collaborative playwrights *and* performers in "Alice Hoy is Not a Building - Women in Academia." These four drama specialists, faculty at the University of Melbourne, researched the gendered history of their institution and reflected on their own academic roles "to undertake detailed analysis of the data through dramatic exploration and simultaneously to construct a dynamic, engaging and informative performance text" (p. 88). The co-authors provide exceptional detail on how the play script emerged through workshopping, and honest accounts of the negotiations process as to what would be included and excluded. Most notable to this project was the cyclical evolution of the script after each performance in different venues, in which audience feedback generated new data for the performers to consider. I was unable to attend the performance when it played at international research conferences, but close and trusted colleagues of mine who saw the production in the U.S. and Australia told me it was "great."



Chapter 7: Jill Robinson's "Encounters in Child Care" documents her reader's theatre approach to her ethnodramatic work. She humbly confesses at the beginning of her chapter that she is not a theatre artist but a health care professional who was inspired to create a performance

about her research and field experiences with child services. Joyfully, the personal learnings shared in her account are some of the richest pieces of advice about creating ethnodrama I've ever read. It is, in fact, wonderful testimony from a non-theatre scholar who took a risk with an intriguing medium of research representation and presentation.

Robinson was able to extract four major themes from a formal, traditional analysis of her research data about parents and social workers. The challenge, though, came in adapting those findings into a dramatic medium:

In my first attempts at constructing dialogue from transcribed data I focused chiefly on these themes and went about it much the same way as I would have chosen extracts of data which best exemplified the findings taken from the fully indexed data archive. . . . In doing so I completely failed to produce anything that came close to credible dialogue or a coherent script. (p. 108)

Robinson learned that the "humanity" of the cases was lost through verbatim composition. She then developed fictional yet composite characters and interwove transcript data from several participants. Ultimately she learned, "Had I been adventurous enough not to rely on the data so exclusively, I believe the script would have benefited from some fictitious dialogue. . ." (p. 118). Her final list of recommendations to others writing ethnodramas closely parallels the sage advice also taught to novices in standard playwriting classes; among them:

- Have a clear sense of the shape of the story you want to portray before you start.
- Keep it simple with a manageable cast of characters.
- Don't get overly attached to specific sections of data. (p. 120)

Chapter 8: Linden Wilkinson's "A Day in December" is a verbatim theatre project of survivor accounts from a December 2, 1999 commuter train crash outside Sydney. Wilkinson included media reportage plus public inquiry documents about the tragedy, in addition to survivor interviews, in the script. One the major problems encountered was one faced by all playwrights, regardless of genre or style: the structure of the play. Wilkinson notes that "The play's structure had to create a dramatic unity, the transcripts' content did not. . . . Relationships that did not exist in the field had to be created in performance" (p. 129). The play's events were organized chronologically in order to create "dramatic momentum," but the playwright still faced challenges with the reconstruction of monologue and dialogue: "I certainly found that over the entire arc of the verbatim theatre journey I became more flexible both in what was said when and who said it" (p. 142). Wilkinson provides honest testimony as an artist and a rare glimpse at the evolution of a verbatim theatre production from conception to performance.

Chapter 9: Estella Wong, Phoebe Chan, and their students collaborated on "Scrap Pickers and Other Local Hong Kong Projects." The multiple authors emphasize that the process of ethnodramatic production development may have been richer for the actor/students than for their audiences. The "experience of watching an ethnographic performance can never replicate that of taking part in it. For the researcher/performers, creating such a performance is an outstanding way to analyse and interalise research findings" (p. 160). Some members of selected projects struggled over the ways to present and represent their participants through scripted and staged work, particularly in matters of verbatim vs. "theatrically adventurous" modalities. Will Lui, one of the students, confidently asserts for his project:

Just as the research data enriches the art form, so drama can enrich the representation of the research data, by effectively reliving the multi-dimensional meanings of research data. . . . Contrary to some authorities, I believe that accuracy, not imaginative understanding, is the core concern of ethnodrama and in our project the need to represent the data accurately was a high priority. (p. 166)



Chapter 10: Victor Ukaegbu and Jumai Ewu in "Performing Histories - Voices of Black Rural Community" document their ethnodramatic development about Black history in Northamptonshire. The co-authors note that community input played a major role in the production's contents and structure, resulting in a performance that "was in parts biographical, epic, naturalistic, and occasionally expressionistic, all contained in a flexible episodic storytelling framework. It accommodated other expressive forms such as music, dance, poetry, re-enactment and multi-media" (p. 178). Those with vested interest in community-based projects will find this chapter particularly relevant in learning how ethnodramatic representation and presentation can

be created through facilitated guidance of artists, rather than the lone playwright adapting field note data.

Chapter 11: Richard Sallis in "Investigating Masculinities in School" provides a summary of his doctoral thesis project--educational ethnographic fieldwork in a Victoria, Australia secondary school drama program. Sallis focused on how boys construct their gender identities in mixed-gender classrooms and how the arts play a role in their social interactions and drama work. Interestingly, Sallis developed an ethnodrama *about* the young participants performed *by* other young participants. Some of the key learnings from Sallis' experiences include the "page to stage" transformation:

I transformed my data into narrative forms other than scripted scenes. I reasoned that transforming the data in this imaginative way freed me to organise my thoughts up to that point and to write meaning into what was emerging from the data. . . . The narrative pieces which were the most dramatically engaging and meaningful were re-worked into dialogue and action for my performance. (p. 193)

Sallis originally wanted to maintain a verbatim approach to his ethnodrama, but as the project continued he confesses that he "decided to cut myself some artistic slack" (p. 194). The playwright incorporated what is referred to in the school's drama curriculum as "non-naturalistic techniques"--"soliloquies and asides, disjointed time sequences, transformation of time, place and object, movement and mime sequences," plus multimedia and Brechtian and Boalian dramatic forms into the ethnodramatic text (pp. 198-199).

There is a poignant vignette in the chapter in which Sallis negotiates with a student troubled over the way he is portrayed in an initial draft of the ethnodrama. Sallis listens to the boy's concerns, learns that their perceptions differ, and together they rewrite the problematic text. Sallis advises that "sharing the emerging script with participants can generate rich detail, opinions and perspectives that may otherwise remain hidden" (p. 197). Sallis exhibits commendable ethical concern for and with his adolescent participants and their drama teachers, and his excellent Ph.D. thesis (2010) gives a full account of the project.

Closure

The only major regret I have about *Performing Research* is its lack of production photographs. Granted, in some cases photographs of participants and/or the performances may have been difficult to obtain in terms of permissions. But since ethnotheatre is a visual as well as verbal medium, it is critical that we provide as much illustrative documentation to inform the readership of what this genre "looks like." This is especially important for non-theatre colleagues who wish to venture into the art form, and who can benefit from pictorial guidance about staging, composition, picturization, and other director/actor communication techniques.

Another regret is a broader one: not having access to complete ethnodramatic play scripts and/or video recordings of the performances. It would be a tremendous asset to scholars and

artists to get instantaneous access to these materials. It's one thing to read *about* a production, but it's quite another to read the entire dramatic text itself. I am frustrated with seeing citations to ethnodramas in the literature, checking the References for the bibliographic information, and learning that they are "unpublished manuscripts." I acknowledge that the ability to get a complete play script published in a mainstream journal, or as an individual script through leasors such as Dramatists Play Service, is very difficult. But if authors can somehow make their work available and downloadable through a web site link or even an e-mail address to contact for a copy of the script, that would be ideal.

But even better would be a video recording (when possible) of the actual performance, posted onto a personal web site, available as a DVD for purchase, or available through such public sites as YouTube. (For example, you can view the entire ethnodramatic production of The National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke in 11 parts on YouTube, beginning with: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4cIV-e1wcU>.) I frequently hear the argument that a mediated recording is not the event itself--the live performance *is* the ethnotheatrical experience. True, but interested audience members like myself cannot globetrot to every single on-site production. A video recording may not be the actual event, but it is at least accessible documentation of potentially exciting work that has the ability to reach hundreds if not thousands of like-minded colleagues.

Performing Research is highly recommended reading for all arts-based educational researchers, particularly those with a drama/theatre disciplinary focus. It is also strongly recommended for college/university library acquisition. Ackroyd & O'Toole's text serves as excellent reading for courses in advanced qualitative research, narrative inquiry, theatre-in-education and, of course, ethnodrama/performance ethnography. Playwrights, dramaturgs, literary managers, and directors in mainstream theatrical production will also benefit from this book.

I extend my personal thanks to Judith Ackroyd, John O'Toole, and their contributors for making a substantive contribution to the ethnodramatic literature.

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Note

The photos embedded in this review are from the ethnodrama *Street Rat*, by Johnny Saldana, Susan Finley, and Macklin Finley, produced in 2004 at Arizona State University.

About the Author

Johnny Saldaña is a Professor of Theatre at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. He is the author of *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (AltaMira Press, 2005), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Sage Publications, 2009), and the forthcoming *Understanding Qualitative Research: The Fundamentals* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

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