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## Playbuilding as Qualitative Research: A Participatory Arts-Based Approach: A Review Essay

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Book Reviewed: Norris, J. (2009). *Playbuilding as qualitative research: A participatory arts-based approach*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

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Norris' AERA award-winning book *Playbuilding as qualitative research: A participatory arts-based approach* is a welcomed research text which makes a valuable contribution for researchers, artists and educators interested in using theatre to engage in arts-based research. His book comes at a time when a number of important international scholars interested in applying theatre as a research methodology are sharing book length works: Judith Ackroyd & John O'Toole (2010) *Performing Research: Tensions, Triumphs and Trade-offs of Ethnodrama*; Tara Goldstein (2011) *Staging Harriet's House: Writing and Producing Research-informed Theatre*; and Johnny Saldana (2011) *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage*. These scholars respectively provide their valuable and insightful perspectives on theatre's potential to inform/enhance research. For his part, Norris clearly articulates *how* and *why* playbuilding (based upon collective creation) can be an insightful and valid approach for researchers and artists to consider for their work.

*Playbuilding as qualitative research* is divided into three parts. The first part provides a thorough foundation where Norris articulates the theoretical underpinnings and methodological approaches for playbuilding as research. This part is supplemented by a detailed history of Mirror Theatre, the company he formed to create the research-informed plays. In part two, he offers background information and the actual scripts of eleven collective plays/vignettes that Mirror Theatre generated and produced for various audiences over the last few decades. In the final part, amidst some informative reflective writing on his research approach, Norris describes some hands-on, practical strategies he uses to effectively bring the audience into the work and consequently generate further discussion and learning.

A key contribution of the book is Norris's invitation to consider theatre as a form of research that extends discussions instead of only presenting particular findings. More specifically, the theatrical presentation becomes part of the ongoing research itself as he invites his audience to engage with the given topic post-performance. For instance, his vignette on peer pressure in chapter 4 acts as a catalyst to stimulate the audience to bring their ideas, concerns, experiences, and feelings about the topic to the shared space. All the vignettes Norris shares in part two of the book center on social issues that warrant discussion, and his theatre-based approach aims to engage the audience to consider the multiple sides of the issues. Yet, as importantly, the author shows in detail how and why the post-discussions and forum theatre activities generate further learning for participants. The approach resonates with Boal's work on Forum Theatre (1995), yet Norris has artistically and creatively carved out his own angle on Boal's work which he explains and expands upon in the final part of the book.

Another significant contribution Norris offers researchers centers on his description and use of data generation. The approach of the A/R/Tors (artist, researcher, teachers) is to collectively create, playbuild, a play on a given topic, i.e., bullying, drug abuse, teen pregnancy. They generate the data mainly from their life experiences, but also by doing research if needed through readings on the given social issue they are tackling. In the collective group exploration, memories and experiences are provided by the A/R/Tors, and Norris guides the group through various stages of development prior to creating theatrical vignettes. This layered and careful drama-based process functions as a nuanced form of data analysis and synthesis. Norris' approach is distinct from a number of other researchers in this field who most often collect data through more traditional approaches such as interviews, surveys, observation field notes, and then construct a play based on those findings.

I recommend *Playbuilding as qualitative research: A participatory arts-based approach* for all arts-based researchers, and in particular those interested theatre/drama educational research. Readers will find a balance of theory, methodology, practice, and history in Norris' book, and as significant, they will witness nearly 30 years of creative, research work by a passionate, thoughtful, internationally-known theatre education practitioner-scholar.

### **References**

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### **About the Reviewer**

**George Belliveau** is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in theatre/drama education. His research interests include research-based theatre, drama and social justice (bullying), drama across the curriculum, and Canadian theatre. His co-authored book with Lynn Fels, *Exploring curriculum: performative inquiry, role drama and learning* (2008), was published by Pacific Educational Press.

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