

NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO: INTRODUCTION

As Director of *The Dukes Theatre In Education Company* for seven years, and having been involved in the development of over fifteen theatre in education programs, I know the value of having a playwright involved in the devising process. During those years, I was lucky to have been able to draw on the expertise and the talents of first-rate writers for young audiences, including Geoff Gillham, Maureen Lawrence and Chris Cooper.

When we embarked on the devising of *No Particular Place to Go*, we were hopeful that we would secure supplementary funding to employ a writer as part of the devising company. Sadly, the grant did not materialize, and so it fell to me to write the final script. Having already written a number of plays, I could hardly claim to be a novice; but the task of converting a mountain of research data into a piece of theatre presented a daunting challenge.

The fact that I knew that, in the past few years, a number of applied theatre practitioners had been involved in the development of plays that presented ethnographic data was of little comfort to me. I felt that I needed to go back to fundamentals and remind myself what **precisely** ethnography was, before I could begin to navigate the maze of ethnodrama, or ethnotheatre, and its various manifestations.

The clearest (and most helpful) definition I found was in Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson's *Cultural Anthropology*, first published in 1983. In it, they state that, "ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people'"(Harris & Johnson, 1983/2006, p. 5). Essentially ethnography provides a description of a

particular culture or group – their customs, beliefs and behaviour – based on information collected. In the recent past, traditional ethnographic practices have evolved into new forms – most notably, for my purposes, forms that seek ways of performing ethnographic research.

According to Johnny Saldaña in *Ethnodrama: An anthology of reality theatre* (2005), ethnodrama, simply put, is dramatizing data (p.2). But of course, nothing is quite that simple.

I counted 67 terms for what is essentially the same thing (e.g. “scripted research”, “research-based theatre”, “performative inquiry”, “conversational dramatism”, “performance science”, “verbatim theatre”, “ethno-mimesis”, “informance”, “stand-up theory”...) (Saldaña, 2005, p.34).

Finally, just when I thought that human ingenuity had reached its limit, I discovered the term, “métissage” (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Hurren, Leggo & Oberg, 2008)!!! (As far as I understand it, a braiding of the different stories of respondents.)

Interesting though these different approaches are, I can’t say that they provided me with much guidance when confronted with the problem of how to create a compelling piece of theatre; in this particular case, a portrait of the practices, customs, beliefs and behaviour of older drivers. The challenge to be faced was: how to sift, analyze, evaluate, transpose and present the mountain of data collected.

As one of the actors put it: as Applied Theatre Practitioners, we “understand that an audience will

resonate more deeply bearing witness to the intimate relations of a family than a presentation of quotes, no matter how profound or moving they are. Even quotes such as, ‘losing my license is almost as bad as losing my wife’ do not have the desired impact if there is no context build around them” (Anne Cirillo, course notes, July 30, 2009).

For me, this quote neatly summarizes the dilemma faced by the playwright who embarks on this kind of practice. I want begin to tease out aspects of this dilemma.

In his book, *Interpretive Ethnography: ethnographic practices for the 21st century* (1997), Norman Denzin draws a distinction between the traditional realist-positivist approach to ethnography and the more contemporary interpretive approach.

It will come as no surprise to learn that the interpretive approach is criticized by traditionalists, principally on the grounds of failing to use established methods of verification. They reject the interpretive ethnographers use of random examples and representative texts; their tendency towards emotional intimacy; their use of multiple voices and perspectives; and their use of realistic dialogue.

This presents a major stumbling-block since, in my view, the stock-in-trade of the playwright is: the creation of representative texts; and, the use of: emotional intimacy, multiple voices, and realistic dialogue.

Denzin illustrates the difference (and the potential dangers of the interpretive approach) with a revealing example from journalism. Janet Cooke wrote an article, published in the *Washington Post*, about an 8-year-old heroin addict, entitled 'Jimmy's Story'. When challenged about the veracity of her article, she admitted that she had compiled the story from a composite of information she had received from a variety of different sources. She subsequently became a pariah in the journalistic community. Denzin makes the point that "she was judged by the standards of [a] community, in which the lines between truth and fiction are never to be crossed"(p. 151).

Always having been an advocate of the dictum that you should 'never let the truth get in the way of a good story', Janet Cooke's experience certainly offers food for thought.

Inevitably, this leads us into the minefield of ethics. Saldaña (2005) describes his plays as "not so much photographs of real life as they are impressionist portraits"(p. 32). I like this formulation: none of the characters in *No Particular Place to Go* is based on real research respondents – each is a composite, pieced together from the research data. This, of course, begs the question: are these composites legitimate representations or fictional constructs – art for ethnography's sake? Or, more baldly, as Denzin (1997) puts it, sacrificing truth for dramatic effect, producing "fabrifacts" (p. 142). I don't believe that the play contains any fabrifacts.

Clearly, there is a tension between the playwright's ethical obligation to create an authentic representation of the data and the license required for the artistic interpretation of that data. Jim Mieniczakowski another exponent of ethnodramatic form, emphasizes the importance of remaining true

to the data and ensuring that what is being presented is real and typical of the experiences of the respondents (personal communication, April 2010; see also Mienczakowski & Moore , 2008. p.456; Mienczakowski, 1997, p. 170).

Our colleagues in the *Centre on Aging*, who conducted the original research, were much concerned with the accurate representation of the data and often argued for the inclusion of facts, perspectives and quotes that were occasionally difficult to weave into the fabric of the script. On reflection, I think that there are two or three instances in the play where I failed to satisfactorily integrate the data; in other words, there are moments when you hear the data, rather than the characters, ‘speaking’. However, in many ways, it was these concerns that ‘kept me honest’ as a writer, and reigned in my occasional flights of fancy. The way in which the play was received gave us all cause to believe that the play was indeed typical of the experiences of the respondents.

Dwight Conquergood in his 2003 article, ‘Performing as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of ethnography in performance’, identifies four ethical pitfalls in this kind of work: ‘**The Custodian’s Rip-off**’, where the group represented is denigrated for the purposes of entertainment (it would have been easy to indiscriminately use the stories of the older drivers to get cheap laughs); ‘**The Enthusiast’s Infatuation**’, where the experience of the respondents is trivialized (difficult, especially when an older driver likened the losing of his license to losing his wife, but possible nevertheless); ‘**The Curator’s Exhibitionism**’, where cultural differences are over-emphasized (the presentation of the stereotypical bemused and bewildered Senior); and, ‘**The Skeptic’s Cop-out**’, where realism is sacrificed in the name of sensationalism (it would have been easy to exaggerate some of the driving ‘horror-stories’ that were recounted). As a company, we like to believe that we successfully avoided

these pitfalls in the making of *No Particular Place to Go*.

I'm conscious that, as I have described my approach in this Introduction, I may appear to be a little cavalier about some of the ethical concerns that always seem to raise their heads whenever applied theatre projects are described. I am, however, mindful of Dwight Conquergood's injunction: "opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books" (Conquergood, 2003, p. 399). In *No Particular Place to Go*, it is our hope that in opening up the lives of the Older Drivers (and members of their families) who formed part of the study, we have given authentic voice to the very real concerns that are reflected in the research data and helped open up a dialogue that might otherwise not have taken place.

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September 2010

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Acknowledgement: I would like to thank my Ph.D. student Kathy Bishop for her assistance, in particular with the navigation of the terms surrounding ‘ethnodrama’. WD
