EDITORIAL

MICHAEL BALFOUR
University of New South Wales, Australia

RICHARD SALLIS
University of Melbourne, Australia

The tyranny of distance

This special issue of Applied Theatre Research attempts to capture something of the magical discourses of the 9th International Drama In Education Research Institute (IDIERI) conference, held in Auckland, New Zealand in July 2018. The theme of the conference was the tyranny of distance, reflecting on the region’s remoteness from the Northern Hemisphere, concepts of the colonial and the cultural interrelationship with sites of power – both old and new. Underlying these themes was a growing awareness that there has been a global shift in power politics, including emerging economic and increasingly geo-political ruptures, with the emergence of China and Russia as powerful world brokers. Culture, history and identity both shape and reshape these political narratives. Arguably, theatre practitioners working in community contexts understand the granularity of these epic political dynamics. The stories that surface from the grass roots, from diverse migrant groups of children to white nationalist groups, all tell the story of a century of disruption.

The concept of change and radical geo-political shifts is not, of course, a new thing. In fact, the conference motif was the waka, a vessel that navigated Oceania’s expansive sea of islands and ventured thousands of miles for exploration and trade. The tyranny of distance plays with the concept of centrality and margins, proximity and remoteness, isolation and the ‘lust of the pioneer’.
'The tyranny of distance’ – a phrase initially coined by Geoffrey Blainey in his 1966 book about Australian history – referred to the colonial enterprise. Subsequently, it has been used as a trope to capture the degrees of separation between Australia and New Zealand, and the ‘motherland’. The pain of separation, the way distance itself shapes and reshapes belonging, has echoes in contemporary events, from forced migration to those experiencing forced containment.

This special issue, as with the IDIERI gathering, weaves together themes from applied theatre and drama education research to consider notions of distance and proximity. In some instances, the notion of distance is explored explicitly, while in others it is examined obliquely. Nevertheless, it is a constant companion: sometimes silent, sometimes angry and at other times reflective and insightful. In this issue, we capture academic papers from the two keynotes, together with representatives of work from Norway, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Palestine, Australia and South Africa.

The issue begins with Jan Cohen-Cruz’s ‘Notes from an autumn gardener: Reflections on theatre and distance’, an autobiographical reflection on two turning points in her career and life. The distance here is a temporal one: the article takes two photos of the author as a starting point. The first captures Jan at age 18, a head shot of herself as an innocent young actress with a New York career in mind. The second image is of a community theatre event 60 years later, which involved a Pulitzer Prize-winning community play called Sweat, which engaged residents from her hometown and involved four years of interview. Jan discusses these photos as marking the distance travelled by US theatre over 60 years, the changing times that its twists and turns reflect, and the unexpected journey that she and others of her generation undertook.

Jane Bird and Christine Sinclair’s article examines embodied pedagogy and the perceived proximity and distance between thinking, feeling and the body as a site of risk and possibility as well as a site of knowing – of self, of others (empathy) and of the world. The article focuses on research undertaken by the authors in the International Centre for Classroom Research at the University of Melbourne into the pedagogical and creative learning practices associated with an embodied approach to teaching, and draws on a growing body of research undertaken by cognitive scientists investigating the role of the body as a site for thinking, learning and problem-solving and by drama education researchers into the ways that embodiment can substantially enhance learning.

In the last decade, death boats in the Mediterranean have stolen the lives of thousands of people escaping wars in Iraq, Syria and Gaza. Immigration in Palestine started in the twentieth century by young people escaping to Western countries to dodge forced military service imposed by the Ottoman Empire in World War I, while tens of thousands of Palestinians found themselves forced to leave their cities and villages to dwell in refugee camps. Wasim Al-Kurdi’s article describes, though fragmented poetic memories and reflections, how a drama project in Palestine explored the concepts of place, distance and the ‘other’ in relation to people’s fate. The project explored the meaning of identity as a cultural and historical definition of the individual or group of people, and as an individual’s identification card (passport) and the relation between them.

Governments globally are wrestling with the growing challenges of radicalized thinking and violent extremism. Can participatory drama or applied theatre processes be used to address radicalized thinking in young people? Meg Upton and Michele Grossman’s article reports on the findings of a pilot
study conducted with two Australian secondary schools – one government and one Muslim – implementing an educational resource focused closely on critical thinking and participatory drama to explore the themes of choice and consequence. The project was created in response to a film, *The Dury’s Out*, made by young Melbourne Muslims wishing to highlight the role of the media in shaping Australian’s thinking about Islam and radicalization. The project included federal, state, community and academic partners.

Natalie Lazaroo and Izzaty Ishak take as their starting point Sheila Preston’s (2013) discussion of emotional labour and the applied theatre facilitator, which considers the impact of facilitators managing and performing their emotions in accordance with the ‘feeling rules’ of the professional and cultural setting. Along with other discussions of emotional labour, they use Preston’s work to frame their own study, examining how emotional labour in caring contexts such as the applied theatre space might manifest through the experiences of not only the facilitator, but also the participants. Their investigation is based on the work of The Community Theatre (TCT) project, a drama-based group in Singapore that enlists youth volunteers from low- and middle-income backgrounds. Drawing on interviews, reflective journals and workshop notes, the authors begin to articulate the importance of a critical emotional praxis that they suggest might be a useful way to navigate what they have termed the ‘tyranny of emotional distance’ in applied theatre work, with the perceived negative effects caused by constant emotional management.

Carol Carter and Richard Sallis’s article discusses the use of drama as a method for teaching and learning within two case studies in different geographical locations and teaching contexts in Australia. One case study, located at the University of Newcastle, is in the field of enabling education that supports students to gain the knowledge and skills required to continue their journey to a higher education degree. The other, located at the University of Melbourne within an existing university postgraduate pre-service teaching program, predominantly supports students from overseas to gain the knowledge and skills required to enter the teaching profession in an Australian context. These case studies, which are also part of a broader ongoing research project, examine the role that drama can play in the creation of supportive dialogical spaces for learning in higher education contexts where the students come from a diverse range of socio-cultural backgrounds.

Wendy Lathrop Meyer’s article examines how artistic processes can shed light, investigate and comment on moral dilemmas. She draws on Nicolai Gogol’s dramatic script from 1836, *The Government Inspector*, a Russian farce about corruption. The article examines a project aimed at drama students in Norway and Tanzania, which aimed to support drama students to investigate and interpret their own ideas of corruption through process drama activities. The article questions whether and how the students’ cultural identity affected their own perspectives on the issue by exploring the impact of corruption through dramatic representations.

Drama has been found to enhance engagement and learning in science, but its use remains relatively rare. Carrie Swanson’s article reports on a mixed method action research project that examined whether the concept of Mantle of the Expert supported or constrained the learning of science with 29 students in Years 7 and 8. Data generated from student pre- and post-unit assessments, observations of classroom episodes, student and teacher interviews, and classroom artefacts was analysed statistically and thematically. The positioning triad of *position, storyline* and *speech acts* was used to show how
the different components of Mantle of the Expert supported science learning. In addition, the data showed that the students improved significantly in their conceptual understanding of the science taught and provided an opportunity to work within an expert scientist role.

Lucy Winner’s reflection examines two moments from a ten-year practice of the Winter/Summer Institute (WSI) that illuminate the complexities of working across multiple layers of distance – geographic, cultural, linguistic, racial and educational. WSI, an applied theatre project co-founded by eight artists and educators from the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa and Lesotho, Southern Africa, has provided a space for exploration, interaction and collaboration with participants from vastly different cultures. WSI, which began in 2006 in Lesotho in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, has brought people together to question assumptions and biases, engage in problem-solving, improvise ideas and create exciting theatre. The author describes how, in grappling with all kinds of questions, the best preparation for applied theatre work is that which allows us to think deeply ahead of time and to be as nimble as possible in navigating the moment to moment – the unexpected. This article points to the importance of recognizing the rich potential for competing narratives and for multiple interpretations, and the value of being critically aware of our own discomforts and of trying to step back from them.

Despite coining a phrase that has become a cliché, Geoffrey Blainey was modest about the ubiquity of the term ‘the tyranny of distance’. The phrase has inspired the name of a café and was used in an old Split Enz song ‘Six Months in a Leaky Boat’ (‘The tyranny of distance didn’t stop the cavalier’), which became the official conference anthem. Blainey was, however, surprised at how literal the phrase became, having intending it to be a looser, more ambiguous term and arguing that ‘no tyrant ever went un-resisted’ (Haigh, 2016). It is exactly this idea that the special edition seeks to capture and address. All tyrannies and tyrants need to be resisted and negotiated. As Peter O’Connor (the Director of the 9th IDIERI) observes:

More than ever we are in need of kai ariki, the carved figure that sits at the back of seafaring waka. This figure typically looks up at the stars and can be used to represent reflective practice by the poets, artists, orators, scientists, knowledge bearers, producers and experts who help to navigate and remember life’s journeys.

REFERENCES


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