

Editorial

by

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Youth and Age: Applied Theatre Grows Up

2000–2010 – the lifespan of this journal, and of this century too. For applied theatre, the busy, often productive, sometimes confusing and occasionally brilliant decade of the ‘noughties’ is over. Quite a few books about applied theatre have been published, as well as several journals, and there are university and college courses everywhere. By now we have pondered the lessons of the twentieth century, when what we call applied theatre emerged, along with multiple differently named manifestations of drama in social and educational contexts ... or we should have pondered them, because we are well and truly embarked on the twenty-first century.

The Applied Theatre Researcher can add a tiny historical detail to the pondering process. Helen Nicholson, among the keenest and most conscientious chroniclers of the field, recently noted the

general vagueness that accompanies all accounts of the derivation of the term, suggesting that it was not a term coined by a particular individual to describe a very precise set of practices, but that the term emerged haphazardly and spread like a rhizome to fill a gap in the lexicon (2011: 241).

That’s an elegant simile, and her speculation is quite right, as our little part in the process will confirm. The term ‘applied theatre’ did emerge in the early 1990s, in several places simultaneously, in that osmosis of shared ideas we are very good at as a community: ‘process drama’ and ‘teaching artist’ are two similar widely used contemporary coinages that sprang up in several places during the same period just when the concept was needed – a bit like those children’s rhymes and jokes that pop up and are collected at the far ends of the earth within 24 hours.

We played our part in this diffused genesis: a group of Griffith University drama lecturers were sitting in a Gold Coast waterfront cafe some time in 1991, speculating – as we all do – on the changing, broadening scene in drama and theatre. We were trying to find a new term (as we endlessly do, too) to bring together the common and converging elements of drama education, fringe and experimental theatre, theatre for development and contemporary rehearsal processes. There was an element of tension in this discussion, as we were considering the changes necessary for our tertiary education offerings; and one of our number, Mike Foster, had an abiding and deep distrust of all things educational, especially those labelled as such. He it was who suddenly came up with the suggestion ‘How about “applied theatre”?’ There was a rare moment of agreement among us as we embraced the term, not too critically.

Over the next three or four years, we started to put together plans for a degree course, and we also founded the Griffith Centre for Applied Theatre Research, with Philip Taylor as its first Director – it was, of course, Philip who started this journal. Meanwhile, we stumbled across the visionary work of Manchester’s already identically named centre, whose work shared many of

our own emerging definitions and principles (though it was much more single-mindedly focused on doing social good than we were, and much more proactive in its projects). We also began to hear the phrase, equally independently, from other colleagues in Canada and Africa. The rhizome effect was certainly taking root.

However, the application of theatre to social situations, issues and problems, and outside theatre buildings, pre-dates the last decade of the last century by far. At one end of the globe, sixteenth and seventeenth century British schoolmasters and their students enthusiastically and very publicly applied drama to their studies, using both English and Latin to produce what was possibly the first secular – and mockingly satirical – play in English (*Ralph Roister Doister*), and even formed some highly successful professional youth theatres, sufficiently successful for a noted playwright to intimate in his play *Hamlet* some indignation and concern at their public popularity:

There is, sir an eyrie of children, little eyasses, that cry out on the top of question, and are most tyrannically clapped for it ... these are now the fashion and ... berattle the common stages.¹

(Not to mention their threat to the livelihood of grown-up playwrights!) Much earlier still – five hundred years at least – at the other end of the globe, we discovered recently with delight, the doctoral examinations for wannabe mandarins in Vietnam included in-role writing and probably also formal oral and poetic presentation in role (candidates had to discuss matters of state and formulate policy, assuming the personage of the Emperor himself). (Howland, 2009: 102–7)

What, I wonder, would have been the content of this journal then ... and then? Back in the archives of our 1100 Centenary edition, we might look for that epoch-defining manifesto from 1071 on ‘Drama at Van Mieu-Quoc Tu Giam: Producing the Sons of the Nation Through Role-Play’ and the brilliant series of case studies of reflective practice in our editions of the next three decades – all in verse – by the candidates and their teachers. In our 1601 edition, perhaps we’d find a brace of papers – one written by the Head of Drama at Westminster School: ‘the legacy of *Ralph Roister Doister*’, enumerating the multiple instrumental efficacies of drama in schools especially for encouraging literacy; the other by Shakespeare (or more likely Robert Greene), decrying the dilution and betrayal of the art form of theatre in the cause of education. And what a long-running debate that one turned out to be, almost monopolising our pages for years until we had to turn to the rather more immediate threat to our very existence from those confounded Puritans who denounced all drama in their own academic Black Paper as ‘a gin of the devil’.²

A quick glance through this journal’s eleven years to see how it reflects the changes that have happened within the very much briefer period of our real existence shows an important and very welcome development. The next generation has arrived. In our first edition, the articles were weighted heavily towards papers by established, mature and mostly quite senior writers and practitioners – establishing the *gravitas* of a new journal in a new discipline is paramount, as editor Philip Taylor well knew. Younger researchers made a growing impact from volume 3 onwards. This year, our youngest ever contributor, still in her teens, has fully earned her place, and almost all our papers are by what in Australia are often called ‘early career researchers’ – though they mostly also have had considerable and very active careers in the practice of drama. Coming from very different continents, countries and cultures, these contributors demonstrate some admirable characteristics in common:

- They are confident in their field and can articulate both a clear definition of the field and the often interwoven and overlapping definitions within it.
- They have done their homework maturely, consulting and absorbing the literature, and respecting and utilising both the work that has gone before and the traditions within which they are working.
- As an essential complement to this, they are not over-awed by either the traditions or the weight of the literature, as some of us too often have been, and they have spotted the gaps, failures and inconsistencies and contradictions in what is ‘known’. These are the things they are energetically and imaginatively targeting – welcoming the problematics, seeking to fill the gaps, address the failures and inconsistencies, and resolving the contradictions by looking laterally as well as logically.
- Finally, they are both critical and self-critical – not with assumed humility, but with a robust and sophisticated honesty.

The first article is one of two in this issue by the same writer, dealing with very different aspects and paradigms within the same project. Andrea Baldwin is part of a major multidisciplinary initiative using theatre and local art forms, health education, psychology and sociology, and local indigenous cultural understanding to facilitate and improve HIV-AIDS awareness in Papua New Guinea. This is a field that has been well known to applied theatre workers for nearly two decades, and Dr Baldwin takes us meticulously and respectfully through the minefield of problematic cultural, educational and aesthetic factors that the team is navigating.

In our second article, Erika Piazzoli turns a critical blowtorch on her own use of process drama in additional language teaching immersion courses, and provides multiple insights for the many other drama teachers enthusiastically and belatedly taking up this obvious area of applied theatre potential.

Eighteen-year-old Hallie Greenberg was the founder several years ago of after-school theatre programs for adolescents like herself in New York, called ‘Performing Arts from the Heart’. Demonstrating that arts from the heart do not need to exclude the head, in the third article she uses a surefooted mix of quantitative and qualitative methodology to study her group’s programs and test out some of the now classic claims made in *Champions of Change* (1999) and *Critical Links* (2002) that theatre gives agency to young people of low-income backgrounds.

The idea of theatre as an agency for change in young people gets another thorough and critical workout from Chan Yuk-lan Phoebe in our fourth article, chronicling the vicissitudes as well as the successes of a theatre-in-education project she ran in Hong Kong – thoroughly grounded in the literature, it is one of the most honest and realistic, and least self-serving, accounts of such projects among the many we have read over the years.

Returning to Life Drama, the Papua New Guinea HIV awareness project, Andrea Baldwin changes tack completely to wrestle with the aesthetic and intellectual tensions – to say nothing of the cultural ones – involved in trying simultaneously to convey two emotionally contradictory messages through theatre. It is an unusual challenge, as she asserts (though perhaps it is not as unusual in TIE as she thinks), and she and her team have faced it by recognising the tensions and trying to address them.

The final article stands in contrast to all those that precede it: an actor with years of practical community theatre experience over many years, and what is by now an applied theatre traditionalist’s love and appreciation of Brecht and Boal, documents with a neophyte’s

enthusiasm his own discovery of these two giants, and his subsequent experiments in applying theatre in tertiary teaching and health education contexts.

This editorial began by reflecting on the age of the journal and the ways in which we have grown up over the years of its existence (and beyond). Readers will notice another change. We are no longer offering translation of the editorial, abstracts and biographies into French and Spanish as we have done in the past. Instead, we have offered authors the opportunity to provide their biographies and abstracts in their mother tongue if they choose to do so. The decision to offer authors the opportunity to publish their biographies and abstracts in their mother tongue was decided at a meeting of available International Editorial Board members who attended the International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI '09) in Sydney in 2009. At that time, we had hoped that this would be in addition to the French and Spanish translations (the two other official IDEA languages). Unfortunately, as IDEA is no longer able to manage its contribution to the translation costs, we are unable to provide the French and Spanish translations. Chan Yuk-Lan has provided Chinese copy. Erika Piazzoli has provided Italian copy. No other author chose to offer copy in an alternative language for this issue.

Notes

¹ Shakespeare, William (c1601). *Hamlet* – Act 2 Scene 2. Various published.

² Attributed to Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of York, c.1580.

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